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Emily Gerard

A SECRET MISSION

A Novel

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A SECRET MISSION.

CHAPTER I.

THE OGRE.

"Soyez l'homme des champs ; votre rôle est sublime."

—JACQUES DELILLE.

A WHITE low-storied house, some straggling oak-trees grouped about it, stands on the left bank of the river Vistula, somewhere midway between Warsaw and the German frontier.

It is the 9th of April, 1887, and evening. The master of the house, mounted on a stout iron-gray cob, is slowly returning homewards from the village that lies a little way off. The name of the white house—likewise that of the adjoining village—is Stara-Wola, and its owner is called Felicyan Starowolski.

Felicyan Starowolski is a tall, massively framed man turned forty, who might have been stout but for his active and sober habits, and who might have been good-looking if put in the hands of a fashionable tailor and barber. He does not look particularly handsome this evening, attired in a shabby coat of faded fustian, clumsy hob-nailed high boots, and an old brown fur cap, which from constant friction has acquired some resemblance to a mangy cat-erpillar. His full, bushy beard—dark and slightly curly—might have been improved by a little judicious trimming ; and his large, rough, red hands have been none the worse for a closer acquaintance with the glovemaking. But his bearing is erect and self-reliant, and his eyes—concealed by no disfiguring glasses—singularly direct and

straightforward in their gaze. A little wanting in penetration perhaps; eyes that were more likely to reveal their owner's secrets than to discover those of other people. Eminently a contented, healthy, and prosperous-looking man was Felicyan Starowski, as leisurely dismounting from the iron-gray cob—his faithful companion in field and forest—he dismissed it with a resounding slap on the shoulder, and entered the house by the back-door leading from the yard, bringing along with him a subtle but pungent odor of animal and vegetable life—that indefinable essence which, suggestive of budding leaves, sprouting grain, damp, upturned earth-clods, new-born lambs, and daisy-sprinkled meadows, seems to envelop the agriculturist, just as the salt sea-brine clings about the sailor even on shore.

Several large, rough-haired dogs, lying about the corridor in postures of unconventional ease, look up lovingly at their master's approach or greet him with a ponderous wag of their mud-incrusted tails, which rattle against the deal flooring like wooden castanets. One yellow mongrel, younger and more impulsive than the others, receives him with a profusion of well-meant but uncouth caresses, directed indiscriminately at hands, ankles, and knees.

"Down, Burek, down," said Felicyan, with some difficulty extricating himself from the animal's slobbery embraces. At sound of his voice a door at the farther end of the passage was opened, and a fat, rosy boy of four ran to meet his father.

"The Swiencone* is all prepared in the saloon, Papeciu.† Come and see," and, taking hold of his father's hand in his small chubby fingers, he tried to drag him in that direction.

"And the priest was here this afternoon to bless the food," said a girl of seven, who had followed her brother into the passage, "and I helped mamma and Ciocia‡ Luba to arrange the *babas* and *plackis*."§

* Easter repast, consisting of cold blessed viands.

† Diminutive of papa.

‡ Ciocia—maternal aunt.

§ *Babas* and *plackis*, two sorts of cake always baked at Easter in

"I helped, too," said the boy, defiantly. "I carried a basket of eggs from the kitchen."

"But you ate two of them on the way," said his sister, reprovingly.

"Only because the eggs first tumbled down and got broken, and so I had to eat them," explained Kostus,* apologetically.

"Then you are too young to carry eggs if you let them fall," retorted Zosia, with the conscious virtue of one who has alike outlived the awkwardness of youth as well as the sordid temptations of the flesh.

The boy's rosy lips drooped ominously, as though a storm were not far off.

"Never mind, Kostusio," said Felicyan, taking hold of the child in his great strong arms, and tossing him up to the ceiling with a deft movement acquired by long practice; "never mind; you are not too young to eat eggs, and eggs were made to be eaten."

Kostus smiled again, quite convinced by the paternal logic.

"Eggs were made to be eaten," he repeated, gleefully, "and *babas* and *placzki* too, are they not, father? Come and look at them, how fine and large they are!—and, oh! there is such a beautiful calf's head with a lemon in its mouth!"

The Paschal repast, *de rigueur* in every orthodox Polish house, was laid out in a long, low apartment of more comfortable than elegant appearance, a corner room with four windows, of which three looked out to the front on to an open veranda, beyond which glimpses might be had of the grand old river scarce a hundred paces distant; the fourth window commanded a small kitchen garden, enclosed in rather dilapidated planking, and which at the present season showed little else but straggling rows of well-meaning but weak-minded onions and radishes, with here and there

Poland, the former high and crisp, the latter flat, and inlaid with preserved fruits.

* Kostus, diminutive of Konstantine.

a lanky stake, round which there twined the parched and faded wreck of what last year was a haricot bean. Leaning against the planking, in one corner, was a solitary melon-frame, like a delicate invalid, still much huddled up in straw, despite the genial warmth of the April day. Faded curtains, which once had been red, matched the covers of chairs and sofa of convenient but antediluvian shapes; the discolored wall-paper, which had done duty for a score of years, was partially concealed—though scarcely embellished—by a few old, dingy French engravings representing the loves of Paul and Virginia, whose tarnished gilt frames had become so thickly speckled by fly-stains as to present the appearance of some intricate antique design executed in black and gold; speckled, likewise, in the same disfiguring fashion, were two large mirrors, which hung on the long side of the room. These mirrors, of a cheap and inferior quality, which Felician, at the time of his marriage, had purchased from a Jewish colporteur, served well enough to fill up the spaces between the windows; but, viewed as reflectors of the human form divine, they were rather a failure; for whereas the one had a tendency to render tall, narrow-shouldered, and consumptive-looking whoever rashly confided their image to its surface, the other, in equal degree, was prone to metamorphose people into fat, squat dwarfs, with curtailed necks and hideously distended mouths. A never-failing source of amusement to the children, these mirrors; they had christened them the fat and the thin looking-glasses, and as such considered them to be infinitely superior to more literate reflectors which had no such humorous freaks.

Two thirds of the apartment, the only large room in the house, were to-day taken up by a long table, groaning beneath the weight of tall, crisp *babas*, flat, luscious *placzki*, dishes of ham or of roast sucking-pig, and piles of colored eggs temptingly ranged around the calf's head in the centre.

Two women—evidently sisters—were engaged in putting the last touches to the banquet-table. Both were

short, and very dark, with clean-cut, rather square features, low, broad foreheads, straight eyebrows, that were nearly black, and clear olive complexions—comely, wholesome-looking women, of that type often seen in Poland, which denotes some admixture of Armenian blood. They were just sufficiently good-looking to be pleasant and attractive, yet not oppressed with that inconvenient amount of beauty mostly a burden alike to possessor and spectator, from its obnoxious, intruding character, ever compelling self-consciousness on one side and admiration on the other.

Lubormira, the younger of the two, Felicyan Starowski's sister-in-law, was very like what Hala* had been ten years ago, and ten years hence would probably resemble Hala, if fate were as kind to her as it had been to her sister, who, in the warm, congenial atmosphere of domestic life, had found the conditions requisite for developing her qualities, moral and physical, to their fullest extent. At present there was between them the difference that there is between a rosy dawn and a sunny noon, between the blossom and the berry. Luba was eighteen, Hala twenty-six; Luba's waist measured twenty inches—five inches less than her sister's: Hala was dressed in an old brown merino, dyed and turned, and wore her black hair—as long and as thick as Luba's—in two thick plaits wound tightly round her head; Luba had on a dark-blue gown, with ribbons fluttering at throat and wrists, and her hair was piled up high, in not very successful imitation of the most recent Warsaw fashion-plates—for girls are girls, whether in town or country, and even the demurest field-mouse, interred in the most remote stubble-field, will unconsciously strive to make itself attractive, so long as it has not found its mate.

There was yet another person in the room—a parchment-faced old man, his shrivelled form enveloped in a shabby Turkish dressing-gown. Seated immovable in one of the cushioned arm-chairs near the window he might have been taken for a waxwork figure but for a burning light in the

* Hala, diminutive of Helen.

deeply sunk black eyes, just now intently fixed on a solitary fly, which, lured by the April sunshine, had been stretching its cramped limbs on the topmost window-pane. In his withered hand, yellow and transparent almost as a piece of clouded amber, he held an instrument resembling a miniature hunting-whip doubled back upon itself. This was Pan* Nicorowicz, father of Hala and Luba.

Felicyan went up to his wife and gave her a rather loud kiss on the forehead, which she received with a quiet smile, without breaking off her occupation of counting over a packet of damask napkins; he nodded to Luba, and took hold of the old man's bloodless hand.

"Well, grandfather, how goes it?"

"Grandpapa has killed three flies to-day," volunteered Kostus, with an important air.

"Yes; one—two—three," he mumbled, indistinctly. "They are dead—quite dead."

"Ah! your sporting season is beginning again," said Felicyan, looking down at the old man with a sort of indulgent compassion. "If this fine weather lasts, you will soon have plenty flies to kill."

"Yes, yes," said the grandfather, eagerly, rubbing his hands together in senile glee. "Soon, very soon, they will come—dozens of them, hundreds; and I shall kill them all—all!" and he flourished the leather thong with an air of puerile triumph ludicrous to behold, if it had not been so melancholy.

Felicyan turned away from the window. The sight of this old man, who had outlived all the natural instincts and emotions of life only to cling to a harmless but senseless monomania, was a painful one, though the inmates of Stara-Wola, familiarized by long habit, had almost lost sight of its melancholy and pathetic aspect.

Madame Starowska was now going round the table with the packet of napkins, distributing them one on each plate. Luba, with a large nosegay of green parsley in one

* Pan—Mr.

hand, was making it up into little bunches for adorning the calf's head and the roast sucking-pigs—sometimes retreating a step or two, and putting her head to one side with critical air as she reviewed the effect of her handiwork.

"Is not the calf lovely?" said Kostus, clasping together his small rosy fingers in boundless admiration. "I wish it was Easter every day!"

"Poor little calf!" said Zosia.

"The calf is quite happy," said Kostus, with the uncomprehending hardness of very early youth. "It has got a beautiful blue dish to lie upon, and a lemon to eat. See how he is laughing—like this," endeavoring to imitate the ghastly grin of the defunct heifer.

"You stupid boy!" said his sister, contemptuously. "How can it be happy when it is boiled and dead? And the poor old cow has been crying for it all day."

"Why does she cry?" asked the boy, wonderingly.

"Because she is unhappy at having lost her child," said Madame Starowolska, pausing in her occupation. "Just as I should cry if you or Zosia were taken away from me."

Kostus looked curiously at his mother, as though trying to reconcile the idea of tears to her cheerful, smiling face. He had never seen her cry. Tears were only for little children, he thought—almost unknown at Stara-Wola, or connected solely in his small mind with broken noses and a certain birch-rod hanging in his father's room, and which had but rarely been put into requisition.

Something of these thoughts appeared on the boy's transparent countenance.

"Suppose, now," said Luba, who was fond of inventing fairy-tales to amuse the children—"suppose that a wicked ogre were to come here and carry off papa or mamma to a horrid black dungeon, full of wolves and bears and serpents and dragons, would you not cry for them, Kostusio?"

Kostusio's eyes dilated in puzzled, questioning wonder. He did not at all know what to think of such a terrible and extraordinary contingency.

"But there are no ogres, Aunt Luba!" cried Zosia, with

an air of superior wisdom; "they are only just put into picture-books to frighten little children like Kostus. There are no real ogres in the world, are there, papa?"

"I only know of one ogre," said Felicyan, with a grave smile.

"An ogre! A real ogre?"

"A very real ogre."

"What is his name?" asked Kostus.

"And has he got a dungeon?" added Zosia.

"His name is Alexander, and his dungeon is called Siberia," said the father, instinctively lowering his voice.

"Is that true—quite true?" said boy and girl in one breath.

"Quite true," returned Felicyan, looking down at his children's eager faces, his own countenance darkened by that cloud which overshadows every Pole, even the happiest, when alluding to the vast sepulchre of the living, where so many compatriots are wasting away their lives in bondage infinitely more bitter than death itself. Then, stroking the boy's curly head, he added, reassuringly:

"But that need not affect us, Kostusio. Thank God, we are not likely ever to make acquaintance with the ogre, or to see the inside of his dungeon. Even an ogre seldom bites unless you put your hand into his jaws, and we are too wise to do that, my Kostusio—far too wise!"

CHAPTER II.

THE STAROWOLSKIS OF STARA WOLA.

"Story! God bless you! I have none to tell, sir."

—CANNING.

THE circumstances of Felicyan Starowski's life had hitherto been neither interesting nor romantic, and he seemed emphatically to be one of those men destined to pass from cradle to grave in a smooth, humdrum fashion, leaving no particular mark on the world's outer surface. He had, it is true, been forced to take up the burden of life very early; but it was but a commonplace, earthly bundle, challenging neither admiration nor compassion of gods or men—such a bundle as is laid upon many shoulders: the only difference here being that Felicyan Starowski had borne it better than many others in his place might have done. But this was a mere detail, after all, which few people had occasion or leisure to observe; we are most of us so absorbed in carrying our own bundles that we rarely take notice of the precise fashion in which our neighbors are shouldering theirs, and it is only when one of them drops his burden with a crash that it forces itself upon our notice.

Left an orphan at the age of eighteen, saddled with a small estate much encumbered by debt—for his father, a notorious gambler and spendthrift, had given the death-blow to the crumbling fortunes of the once rich and powerful Starowski family—and with a young stepbrother of six, Felicyan Starowski was obliged prematurely to give up his own studies and devote himself to a task that would have baffled a less energetic and single-minded character. Comprehending that it was imperative on him to strain every nerve and muscle to the utmost if he would save his meagre patrimony from the all-devouring Jews, he

had heroically made the sacrifice of his youth, and without intermediate stage had leaped from the heedless joys of childhood to the cares and troubles of maturity.

Pleasure was almost an unknown word to him in those early years of hardship and privation, for he could neither afford to associate with his better-situated neighbors, nor could he have enjoyed their pastimes, weighed down as he was by the responsibilities of his position; so while other men of his age were filling the ball-room or killing time over cards and dice Felicyan was trudging about woods and fields early and late, superintending, working, devising, and executing, literally fulfilling the dictum which condemns man to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. But these years of patient toil had borne their fruit, and by the time Felicyan had reached the age of twenty-six he had already paid off the greater part of the debt attached to the estate, and had put his little brother Roman in the way of obtaining a first-rate education.

A farmer usually marries young, a wife being almost as necessary a condition to his calling as a ploughshare; but Felicyan Starowolski did not deem it prudent to follow general custom in this respect. Until his brother should be securely provided for, he had not the right to think of himself—so, at least, it seemed to him—wherefore he meanwhile bravely contented himself with the ploughshare without the wife.

Roman, son of the defunct Starowolski by a second wife, was very unlike his brother. Eager, nervous, and ambitious, he was gifted with far greater intellectual qualities. For some years he had pursued his studies at the Warsaw Gymnasium with unsatisfactory results, for the lot of a Polish boy at a Russian school is always a hard one. Ambition has there no space to develop, and even talents are often a positive disadvantage to their owner. Roman was not long in finding this out, and in conceiving a deep aversion for his tyrants—an aversion which gradually turned to hatred, till Felicyan, subdued by the boy's entreaties, took steps to have him emancipated from Russian legislation, and sent to complete his education in Ger-

many. Not without great reluctance had Felicyan decided upon this course, which entailed almost complete separation and estrangement from his only near relation, his little Roman, whom he loved more as a son than a brother; and only a sense of duty, born of the conviction that the boy's talents would never reach legitimate development in Russia, had induced him to make the sacrifice.

Nor had he as yet repented his decision, for Roman had fully justified the proud hopes placed in him; and having completed his military studies with all possible honors, at the age of twenty he received his lieutenant's commission.

Felicyan now at last felt free to think of himself, and to form those domestic ties which for long had been his secret desire.

He was not slow in forming them, not being of those men who run after impossible ideals, and expect to find, combined for their exclusive benefit, the beauty of an houri with the virtue of an angel. What he wanted was a simple country-bred girl, of pleasant appearance and affectionate disposition, sufficiently intelligent to be an agreeable companion, and of robust enough health to take her share of farm and household duties.

These qualities he found united in Helen Nicorowicz, the daughter of a neighboring gentleman of Armenian extraction; and to her he rapidly and irrevocably transferred his strong, manly heart, just as he would probably have transferred it to any other seasonable and reasonable woman he had happened to meet at that time. Her modest portion—a few thousand roubles—enabled Felicyan to cancel the last remaining mortgages on Stara-Wola, as well as to discharge his obligations towards his younger brother. The marriage had taken place in 1879—just eight years ago, when Roman, resplendent in the newly acquired glory of a German lieutenancy, had assisted at the ceremony.

It had been a short and hurried visit of scarce a week, yet long enough to give Felicyan, even in the midst of his

newly found happiness, a strange thrill of pain, as he began to realize that he was no longer necessary to his gifted, brilliant younger brother, and that henceforth their paths in life must necessarily lie far apart. They had now lain apart for eight whole years; for Roman, absorbed by the intricacies and ambitions of his career, had not as yet found time to revisit his native country. Correspondence was of course kept up between the brothers; but this, in the absence of all mutual interests, was necessarily of a meagre character, for what comprehension could a simple land-tiller be expected to have of the noble science of war? while, on the other hand, how was it possible to suppose that a promising young German staff officer should interest himself in anything as lowly as the state of the crops in Russian Poland, and the chances of hail or drought?

Pan Nicorowicz, Felicyan's father-in-law, had with his youngest daughter, Lubormira, been an inmate of Stara-Wola for the last half-dozen years, according to the patriarchal custom of the land, which secures a home and a welcome to any one bound by ties of blood in the house of his relation. A renowned slayer of bears and wolves in his youth, failing health had at last compelled him to relinquish such fierce pastimes in favor of hares and woodcock, to which he devoted much attention during a score of years; and even when finally prostrated by a stroke of palsy, which in a moment transformed him into a senseless and harmless individual, henceforth incapable of producing fear even in the heart of a rabbit, the ruling passion, still strong in death, reasserted itself, and, as of yore, the conscious destruction of animal life continued to be the only occupation capable of waking a pleasurable emotion within his petrified heart. Flies were the only available victims in the restrained sphere of an indoor life; but, luckily for Pan Nicorowicz, flies are very numerous in Polish country-houses, where the farm-buildings, mostly adjoining the dwelling-house, produce a perfect Egyptian plague of these insects during the hot months. In their pursuit and annihilation, therefore, this old man found employment sufficient for his remaining span of life. His

small stock of vital and mental energies gradually concentrated themselves on this convenient game, which he tracked and pursued with a persistency calculated to make all the spiders of Stara-Wola declare themselves bankrupt. The winter he usually passed in apathy akin to that of the household insects; but with the renewal of spring his sporting season would begin, and no first swallow was ever welcomed with such genuine rapture as the first fly occasioned to this superannuated hunter.

In order more easily to bag his victims, Pan Nicorowicz had constructed for himself a murderous little instrument twisted together of leather strips, without which he never was to be seen so long as the sporting season lasted, and there were few moments in the summer day when the sharp cracking sound which marked the death of an insect might not be heard at Stara-Wola. The old man would whimper like a child if his weapon were casually mislaid, and to miss a fly occasioned him the same acute disappointment as an unlucky shot will do to a crack sportsman; while to kill doubles—that is, two flies at one blow—was to him the very acme of triumph and delight.

Such was the domestic position at Stara-Wola, at the time my story opens in April, 1887.

CHAPTER III.

SHADOWS.

"A man's best things are nearest him,
Lie close about his feet."

—MONCKTON MILNES.

THE evening was so warm and genial that Felician was tempted to smoke a pipe on the veranda after supper, as he was fond of doing when the weather permitted.

The landscape stretched out at his feet was very familiar, but also very dear to him—all the more dear because of its familiarity. All his memories and associations inextricably twined round the Vistula River, which flowed past his house. He had grown up within sight of it: here he lived and would live out his life, and here he hoped to die. He had gazed on the river so often as to be familiar with its every aspect, with its every light and shade, its tides and currents, its depths and shallows; just as we learn to know by heart every passing expression of joy, grief, hope, or disappointment on the face of a beloved companion. Blue by times, or gray, sometimes golden, sometimes black, but always majestically powerful in its steadfast course, relentless and unswerving as the march of time or fate, the Vistula flowed on, a gigantic mirror, ever reproducing the smiles and frowns of Nature.

The space between house and river was occupied by a broad pasture-field, which, only separated from the house by an indifferently kept carriage-drive, sloped gently downwards, with a perceptible deepening of color, till near the water's edge it resolved itself into an emerald marsh, where in summer waved tall bulrushes and golden-tinted iris flowers.

No iris were in blossom at this early season; but last year's bulrushes, brown and brittle, some erect, some shat-

tered by winter's storms, were beginning to abdicate in favor of a younger, greener generation. Likewise the pollard willows, which framed in the meadow in a sort of fantastic hedge, were covertly budding for themselves a veil of tenderest, softest verdure, too ethereal as yet to be designated as foliage. Twilight was now changing the green veil into gray, and from the river's surface floating white mists were rising to draw a hazy curtain across the scene. The outline of a gigantic raft, laden with wood for the North Sea, flits slowly past, dim and spectral in the waning light, and the pinewood forest on the opposite shore is beginning to lose its distinctness of outline. The voice of a solitary bull-frog, down yonder in the marsh, alone breaks in upon the stillness of the balmy spring evening.

Hala came out and laid her hand upon her husband's shoulder.

"See how finely the grass is sprouting," said Felicyan, passing his arm round Hala's waist and drawing her towards him. "We shall have hay before June."

"The paling must be mended," said Hala, "or else the cows from the upper field will get in as they did last year."

"And the bathing-hut will require to be re-thatched."

"Yes; the summer is going to be hot."

Both were silent for some moments.

"Hala," said Felicyan, suddenly, "can you keep a secret?"

"I shall try," she returned, smilingly. "What is it?"

"A surprise for the children. I have bought a donkey."

"A donkey! with a cart?"

"The cart is not quite ready yet, the paint will only be dry in a couple of days."

"A donkey with a cart!" repeated Hala in soft ecstasy. "How happy the children will be! How good of you! Just what I had been wishing for, only I was afraid it would cost too much."

"That last batch of pigs sold well, and will almost pay for it, and there are no particular expenses impending.

My fustian coat is still quite good, and I dare say you will not require a new summer hat."

"Of course not. Why, my hat is as good as new, not yet two years old, and your coat is quite lovely, Felciu. I always like you better so than in your Sunday clothes; that blue fustian seems so much more natural and home-like."

Felicyan replied by a slight pressure of the waist that his arm encircled.

"May I tell Luba about the donkey-cart?" resumed Hala, after another pause, filled up by the voice of the bull-frog, and by her own blissful visions of endless donkey-drives to the forest in quest of flowers or toadstools.

"If you think she can hold her tongue. I had not meant to tell even you; but I am not a good hand at keeping secrets."

"Let us come in," said Hala, presently; "the mists are rising, and the air is chill."

The mists were, in truth, rising ever higher, taking, as they did so, all sorts of vague fantastic shapes. Now it seemed as though a monstrous white dragon were sailing through the air; then again it was a lanky spectre which appeared to hold up a warning hand towards the couple standing on the veranda.

Together they turned to re-enter the house—Felicyan with his arm still round Hala's waist, when at the threshold they paused again and listened. The bull-frog's croaking voice had ceased, but there was now another sound—the sound of approaching wheels. A carriage—no more than a black shadow in the dusk—was coming up the road that lay to the left of the house. It entered the little strip of avenue, and in the next minute had drawn up in front of the veranda. A figure jumped down with light, springy motion. Who could it be? husband and wife questioned each other wonderingly.

"Felicyan!" now called out the stranger.

"Roman! You here? Impossible!" cried the elder Starowolski, recognizing his brother's voice, yet scarcely believing his ears.

The dogs rushed out barking, and Luba, bearing a light, appeared on the scene to investigate the cause of the disturbance.

Surrounded and greeted, the new-comer was welcomed in proportion to the surprise his appearance had caused. The dogs, on being made to understand that they were not required to tear the stranger to pieces, speedily lost all interest in him, and crestfallenly retired; while Hala and Luba bustled about to make arrangements for food and accommodation.

"What good wind has blown you hither?" asked Felicyan, when the brothers were sitting together over their cigars about an hour later.

Roman gave a quick, furtive glance around the room.

"I have come because—" He broke off, for at that moment Hala came into the room with a bottle of raspberry syrup in her hand.

"Because?" questioned Felicyan, not comprehending the cause of the interruption.

"Oh, because I wanted to spend Easter once more at home," completed Roman with a laugh, in which Felicyan failed to detect anything unnatural.

CHAPTER IV.

A QUEEN.

"But who is this? What thing of sea or land?
Female of sex it seems,
That so bedeck'd, ornate, and gay,
Comes this way sailing
Like a stately ship."

—MILTON.

FROM the detached belfry-tower of a larch-wood church the bell was pealing forth to summon the country-folk of Stara-Wola to their Easter devotions.

The building itself, adorned with wide-spreading eaves and numerous crazy-looking little turrets, was one of the poorest in the land, at which the more enlightened peasants were apt to look superciliously, envying such luckier parishes as possessed a church of real stone; yet dyed and bleached by the storms and sunshine of a couple of centuries, curiously inlaid and fretted by many varieties of moss and lichen, this humble wooden edifice has been transformed into a thing of marvellous grace and beauty.

A very palette of colors this little church, which, changing hue like a chameleon, would like enough drive to distraction any unfortunate artist who, smitten by its quaint beauty, seeks to take its portrait. An emerald in the early morning, when the dew is still clinging to the noisy shingles, it fades to a topaz-brown when the sun has mounted the skies, and, losing color as the day goes on, recovers at evening a brief span of magnificence, according as the capricious sunset chooses to thatch it with gold or with rubies. Four spreading fir-trees, old and venerable as the edifice itself, stand at its four corners, and the whole is railed in by a wooden planking of the same larch-wood of which church and belfry are built. This oblong enclosure, carpeted with short velvety sward, which by

reason of the dense shade cast by church and trees, might rather be designated as grassy moss than as mossy grass, serves as vestibule to the place of worship, wholly inadequate to accommodate the size of its congregation. It is, in fact, a sort of summer temple, which on fine Sundays is thickly thronged by the men, women, children, and dogs who have not been able to penetrate to the inner sanctuary, and who from this subordinate position imbibe as much grace as the open church-door allows to transpire.

To-day this space is more than usually crowded, for people have thronged together from far and near in order to crave the Paschal blessing on the viands they have brought with them.* Dogs are also more numerous to-day than usual, and it would seem as if the whole canine tribe for miles around, infected by a sudden fit of piety, had drawn together to perform their Easter devotions. Doubtless they have their own good reasons for this religious fervor. The church itself is likewise closely packed with kneeling peasants; each one in hand a basket or a mysteriously tied up bundle tightly grasped.

The Starowolski family—including Roman—had come early to church, a drive of scarce ten minutes from the house. Hala and Luba had donned their smartest dresses in honor of the high festival; the latter perhaps also partly because of the distinguished-looking interesting young man, who had thus unexpectedly joined the family circle. Luba's gown to-day was of a rather showy lilac-checked pattern, a good deal encumbered by cheap trimming, and with the brand "country tailor" written all over its surface in characters unmistakable to the adepts of fashion; and Roman, belonging to this class, had merely shrugged his shoulders on seeing the lilac gown, thinking what a pity it was that this girl, who might almost be called pretty, should have made such a figure of herself.

There were no seats in the body of the church, such

* In Poland the peasants bring their Swiencone viands to church to be blessed collectively by the priest, who the previous day has visited the wealthier houses for the same purpose.

luxury being superfluous to the peasants, whose only object it is to pack as close as possible ; but within the chancel, to the right and left of the high-altar, were two blackened worm-eaten benches, reserved for the families of the neighboring gentry who may find it convenient to attend this humble place of worship. In one of these benches the Starowolski family took place, as was their wont—the other one, rarely occupied, was likewise empty to-day.

Service had not yet begun ; every one was waiting for the appearance of the priest, all eyes fixed on the sacristy door from whence he must approach. After half an hour of expectant waiting, a shaky-kneed sacristan comes out, and feebly begins to light the candles. This, however, looks like business at last, and straightway there is a stir in the crowd ; baskets are opened, and bundles knotted up in bright-colored cotton handkerchiefs are untied ; the dogs prick up their ears, and begin to sniff the air hopefully, as the provisions are getting ranged for the blessing. Every peasant endeavors to place his goods to the best possible advantage, so as to secure the largest slice of blessing, and each one casts covert glances of envy or disparagement at his neighbor's provisions.

An overpowering smell of ham rises in the air ; there are hams, sausages, *babas*, loaves, butter, and, above all, eggs—eggs everywhere. A curly-haired urchin is clasping a gigantic *baba* with a ludicrous air of solemn determination ; alongside, a sour-faced old crone is defending her sausages against a lean black hound with acrimonious vigilance. A young girl, with lint-white locks, and eyes as blue as chicory flowers, is lovingly arranging her goods upon an orange pocket-handkerchief spread out upon the ground. One happy woman, proud possessor of a real white sugar lamb, adorned with a red paper flag, which she has placed in the midst of her eggs and sausages, is the object of many envious glances. Whence has she procured this artistic masterpiece, which puts to shame all their home-made dainties ?

Suddenly there is a stir, but it is at the lower, not the

upper, end of the church, and simultaneously all faces are turned in that direction ; the black hound, seeing his opportunity, makes a snatch at the sausage he has been eyeing, and carries it off triumphant, pursued by vigorous but impotent curses on the part of the old crone. The other peasants are far too much absorbed in watching the door to heed the incident. Perhaps the priest has been attending first to his parishioners outside, and is only now coming in here? although this would be contrary to the established order of things. Ever since the oldest villager could remember, and *he* was ninety-four, the priest had on Easter Sunday gone down the church from altar to door, distributing right and left the blessing as he went ; and then, only after every ham, sausage, and egg within the church had been utterly and irrevocably blessed, did he proceed to minister to those outside.

No, it is not the priest, that tall, commanding form just darkening the doorway, for the priest is small and bent double with age ; it is a woman—a lady—whose features are unknown to any of the congregation.

Robed in a regal mantle of sombre velvet, which trails behind in heavy folds, and with a golden crown on her head, she walked in with a sort of languid assurance, not seeming to notice the crouching peasants at her feet any more than had they been so many crawling insects to be trodden down.

Instinctively they fell back, making way for her to pass, as though acknowledging the incontestable right of a sovereign to walk where and how she willed—over their bowed necks if it so pleased her. The young girl with the lint-colored hair, clumsier than her neighbor, had delayed in removing the orange kerchief containing her provisions. It lay right across the passage of the approaching stranger, who, disregarding the puny obstacle, passed over it unheeding.

There is a crunching sound under foot, and then, as the velvet folds swept onward, a vision disclosed of bruised and scattered viands ; a cake shapeless and crushed, bright eggs, cracked and broken, rolling away in every direction.

The lint-haired young girl looks ready to cry as wofully she begins to collect the wrecks of her provisions, vainly trying to make the flattened cake stand up. She had baked that cake so tenderly, so carefully, only yesterday; had watched its progress with such a palpitating heart! How she had held her breath when she had opened the oven-door to see if it had risen properly! and what a moment of triumph it had been when by the family verdict the cake was pronounced ready and successful—and now it would never stand up again!

Meanwhile the stranger had reached the altar, and had taken place in the empty bench opposite the Starowski family. They, too, like the rest of the congregation, had turned their heads on her entrance, and had at first only discerned a tall, regal-looking figure, robed and crowned as befits a queen. Now, as she sat down opposite to them, and—apparently overcome by the stifling atmosphere—leisurely removed an upper dolman of dark-green cloth, which action she performed as naturally and unconcernedly as though she had been at home in her dressing-room, they could see her face quite distinctly, for she wore no veil.

It was the face of a young woman whose age might be anything between twenty-four and thirty; not so much a beautiful face as a remarkable one, impossible to be passed by without a second glance—a face which once seen would always be recognized and remembered. Remarkable, if only for the aquiline sweep of a nose decidedly too prominent for perfect symmetry, and for the large, protruding light-gray eyes. The most baffling of all eyes, of which it is so hard to make out whether they see a great deal or nothing at all; the most incalculable sort of eyes as to their effect upon the other sex, for some men are as much attracted as others are repelled by them. Of the mouth, too, it was difficult to determine whether in its full settled curves it expressed much languor or much determination. Perhaps it would be nearest the mark to say that she looked like a woman who is conscious of possessing much power, but who is too indolent to make much use

of it. One point only about her—her complexion—could not fail to satisfy the most epicurean connoisseur of female loveliness. It was a perfectly flawless, even texture, of that peculiar transparent pinkness which is so hard to describe on paper without being driven to weak-minded comparisons of sunsets on glaciers, rosy sea-shells, and best double-faced satin. In the well-defined ear and the open dilated nostrils, this pinkness intensified makes one think of a thoroughbred race-horse, to which indeed her whole appearance bears a certain undefined and indescribable resemblance. What is seen of her hair seems to be of a dull sort of fairness, with no suspicion of ruddiness about it; the crown, on closer inspection, turns out to be merely a bonnet of one of those novel fantastic shapes, pushed rather far back upon her head, and with wide turned-up flaps decorated with minute gold embroidery, which sparkles as the light of the large Paschal candle falls on it. The dark-green dress, combined of cloth and velvet cunningly intermingled, and devoid of all trimming save some clasps of antique gold workmanship, which hold it together over the breast, is well calculated to display the full swelling bust and the adorable sweep of shoulders of a faultless figure, and if the country tailor was emblazoned all over poor Luba's cheap lilac gown, the magic name of Worth peeps out from every fold of the marvellous robe.

Every detail of the stranger's dress and appearance was carefully scanned by the party opposite, who indeed could not well avoid so doing, seeing that they were only separated from each other by a space of twenty feet, and that none of them could raise their eyes without beholding that surprising vision, the like of which had never yet lighted up the dingy wooden building.

Hala and Luba, using their large prayer-books as screens, peeped out from behind them in round-eyed wonder, trying to penetrate the mystery of that bodice, that fitted like a snake's skin, and like a snake's skin seemed to lie as lightly and easily on its wearer. Zosia and little Kos-tus stared openly and undisguisedly, making no pretence

at all of saying their prayers ; and Felicyan, after a short scrutiny, averted his eyes, renouncing all attempt to fathom this very bewildering specimen of an already sufficiently bewildering sex. Roman alone neither averted his eyes nor stared boldly, but he stole occasional quick restless glances at the stranger, impelled, as it were, against his will, by the indolent power of those large gray eyes, which each time he found fixed upon him—not with any expression of interest, however, but simply as though his face happened to be placed at the most convenient angle for her gaze to rest upon.

The service proceeded to take its usual course, and every one was glad when it approached conclusion, for the combination of incense and ham on a warm spring day hardly made up a refreshing atmosphere. The children began to get restless towards the end of mass, and little Kostus had already several times pulled his mother's dress in mute supplication of deliverance. The Starowski family rose first to go, leaving the stranger sitting alone on the opposite bench. She was engaged in slowly drawing on her dolman again, languidly fastening the clasps that held it together over the chest.

It was a relief to get out into the open air, and each drew a long breath of relief when, having frayed a passage through the crowd of kneeling sheepskin figures at the church-door, the road outside was gained. The road, a little broader at this place, was thronged with the numerous peasant-carts that had brought families from a distance ; for in this district, where Catholic churches are but scantily strewn about, the Polish peasant thinks nothing of driving two or three hours, or even more, in order to attend service. These carts, of the most primitive order of construction, are made of wattled willows on a very slight wooden framework—a long basket on wheels, into which, combined with a little straw, as if to prevent the heads breaking against each other, several generations of a family are packed, to jog many miles up hill and down dale, in quest of religious consolation.

Loudly vociferating peasants are going about between

the carts, many busied in repairing some damage accrued to their vehicle on the drive hither; knotting together portions of the rotten rope-work harness, or trying to stop up unsightly fissures in the wattled sides; while the lean, undersized horses, ill-kept and soiled, are patiently waiting with bowed heads and lack-lustre eyes until they shall be bidden to resume the labors of life. Their foals—for at this spring season almost each cart has a foal appertaining to it—rough-coated, joyous creatures, with mischievous black eyes and short, oscillating tails, are prancing about the deep mud between the carts, trotting, squealing, biting each other, and kicking up their heels, by way of demonstrating that in *their* opinion life is a very good joke indeed.

Among the many vehicles that encumber the road, two only can be dignified by the name of carriage. The first is Felicyan's own modest equipage, a light, half-open barouche, which, ten years ago, when he had bought it second-hand of a neighbor, had presented a tolerably spruce appearance. Now, the yellow oak-stain of the woodwork has lost the last trace of varnish, the leather hood has turned a rusty brown, and the lining is faded and soiled; yet the wheels are still sound, the springs undamaged, and, such as it is—barring accidents—it is good for half a dozen years to come.

So at least thought Felicyan and his wife, who, perfectly satisfied with their conveyance, had failed to take notice of the changes time had wrought upon it; and Hala had always experienced a certain modest pride when, driving through the village seated in her own carriage, she had graciously returned the peasants' humble salutations.

To-day, however, its light is dimmed by a greater glory—just as one star paleth before a brighter one—for scarce ten paces off stands another carriage, whose elegant shape, unimpeachable enamel, and chastely plated silver harness combine to produce a *tout ensemble* of perfect distinction. Three well-bred bays, requiring no pedigree to establish their patrician claim at a glance, are harnessed abreast in

the Russian fashion, and held in check by a coachman whose livery is such as befits the keeper of such noble quadrupeds.

Altogether a turnout worthy to grace the streets of any capital; but looking rather out of place drawn up in the mire in front of a little wooden country church. It has come a long distance, that is evident, for alike the dark enamel of the carriage, as the shining bay coats of the horses, are thickly bespattered by mud; the rich brown mud which at this season lies over the country roads like a sauce, with irreverent touch besmearing peasant and prince alike.

CHAPTER V.

AMBITIONS.

"Moi jamais dans l'erreur de mes illusions
Je n'aspire à régler le sort des nations."

—DELILLE.

"COME," said Felicyan to his brother on their return from church, "there will just be time to walk round the farm before the Swiencone. I want to show you all my improvements."

They went out into the large back-yard, where numerous unfledged lanky ducks, not one of which had attained the dignity of a graceful waddle, were stalking about in the mud, still painfully conscious of their length of limb, and visibly embarrassed by their unæsthetic shortness of tail. A group of lively young pigs were fighting over the delicious contents of a filthy wooden trough, and from the closed doors of an opposite building was heard the plaintive voice of the unhappy cow whose offspring had been immolated on the Paschal altar.

"Here are the work-horses," said Felicyan, flinging open the stable-door. "We had five foals this year, and I want your advice as to which of them should be sold. I cannot afford to bring up more than two."

Roman looked with indifferent eye at the underbred equine babies, which, crowding round them, tried to insert their moist noses into Felicyan's pockets in hopes of discovering some crust or crumbs within them.

"Keep the chestnut and the brown," he said at random, pointing to the two foals nearest him.

"Ah! do you really think so?" said Felicyan, reflectively. "The brown—yes, I had thought of it myself, but I do not feel quite sure about the chestnut. Perhaps not quite breadth enough for working purposes. Now, how about that gray, do you think?"

Roman thought nothing at all about the gray, but he contrived some sort of answer which satisfied his brother.

"And now," said the latter, as they crossed the muddy yard and directed their steps towards another building—"now, Roman, you will be surprised at what I have to show you here!"

There did not seem to be anything particularly surprising about fifteen cows lying down in a row all placidly chewing the cud. The sixteenth cow was standing up, and with back-turned head anxiously eying the door. As it opened she uttered a plaintive moo-o!

"Ah, cows?" said Roman, interrogatively, not exactly knowing what was expected of him.

"Sixteen!" said Felicyan, with a ring of genuine triumph in his voice; "and there were only seven when you were last here, eight years ago. That is something like progress, is it not?" and he rubbed his large red hands delightedly together.

"Wonderful!" murmured the younger brother, absently.

"I do not despair of getting up the number to twenty-four in time," continued Felicyan, "when we have gained more pasture-land by thinning out the edge of the forest. Twenty-four cows! that would be the height of my ambition."

"Do you always keep them shut up here in this close place?" asked Roman, endeavoring to rouse himself to a show of interest.

Felicyan looked at him with surprise. "Why, of course they stay in here all winter, and go out to pasture on St. George's Day, the 24th of April. Surely you remember that? They will only go out to the fields a fortnight hence."

"How they must be longing for St. George to come and release them!" said Roman, with a short laugh, not choosing to confess that he had actually forgotten these details of the Polish cows' calendar. "Let us come outside, the air in here is stifling."

They had still to inspect the large outhouse where were

kept the ploughs, harrows, and other farming implements. Felicyan wished to consult his brother about the expediency of ordering a new winnowing-machine which he had seen advertised in a German agricultural newspaper. The old machine, now worn out and broken, lay overturned at the farther end of the shed.

Roman sat down upon it and stared fixedly at the ploughs and harrows ranged in front of him, his well-marked eyebrows drawn together in a thoughtful frown, as though he were critically analyzing the technical construction of each separate machine.

There was a certain resemblance between the brothers, despite great dissimilarity. The cut of nose and mouth was the same in both cases, and also the long sweeping curves of the dark-blue eyes—real Polish eyes, fringed too with lashes many shades darker than the hair. But here the likeness ended, and after the first day no stranger would have discovered any resemblance between them. Roman, taller, slighter, more delicately framed, his face more classically oval, his fingers white and taper, was eminently a handsome man, with moreover something interesting and quasi-poetical about his appearance which instinctively disarmed the criticism that over-beauty in the wrong sex is apt to challenge.

Had Roman been a farmer and Felicyan a German staff-officer, they would probably have been much more alike; but as it was, the calling of each had fixed and intensified his innate propensities, and rendered their dissimilarity even greater than Nature had originally intended. Had Felicyan received a military training and been accustomed to move in the fashionable world, his plain, unvarnished manner, his somewhat heavy, phlegmatic appearance, would have been corrected and modified; and if Roman had lived in the country, he would never have acquired the super-refinement and elegance of appearance which now distinguished him. But this way Fate had put all the advantages on Roman's side—the advantage of youth, of position, of personal appearance—and yet perhaps not all. There were moments when the elder

brother would seem to be the younger, or rather there were points about Roman which Felicyan lacked—marks and signs which need not have been there at twenty-nine. His dark-brown hair, carefully clipped and tended as befits a man of fashion, was already less thick than Felicyan's, and showed a perceptible thinning off about the temples; around eyes and mouth were numerous small lines, perceptible only to a very close observer, but already speaking of the crowfoot which would assuredly be there ten years hence. Felicyan had none of these signs; and another thing foreign to him was the double eye-glass, dangling by a minute gold chain on Roman's coat, frequently made use of whenever he required to regard anything very closely—but then Felicyan had never had to pass a competitive examination; looking at cows and studying wheat or oats is very much less trying to eyes, hair, or brain than burning the midnight oil over military charts and close-typed German print.

Felicyan had been talking for several minutes about the new winnowing-machine he intended to buy, and the sum he was prepared to spend upon it. He was rather disappointed to find that Roman was not versed in the subject, and could give him none of the information he desired.

"I thought you would have been sure to visit the Agricultural Exhibition at Berlin last year."

"Not I," returned Roman, "that is not my line; what has a soldier got to do with agriculture?"

"No, to be sure," said Felicyan, somewhat crestfallenly; "but at any rate you might go and look at them when you return, and send me the prospectus."

"Gladly. I shall look at every machine in the capital if it will give you any pleasure."

"When do you think of returning?"

"Why, I have only just come. Do you want to get rid of me already?"

"Roman!" exclaimed Felicyan, reproachfully; "you know that my home is always yours when you choose to make it so. It is not my fault if we have been so long without meeting."

"I was only joking. But, seriously, Felicyan, do you know why I have come here?"

"To spend Easter with us; you said so yesterday."

"Yes, but—besides," Roman glanced round the sheds in the same furtive manner he had looked round the room last night. "Listen, Felicyan. Is this place safe? Can no one hear us here?"

"No one," said Felicyan, surprised.

"Well, then, listen. I have been sent here on a secret mission."

"Sent! By whom?"

"By the War Office. We have received information that Russia is— Felicyan," broke off Roman, "would you mind just looking outside to see if there is no one in the yard?"

Felicyan, who had been half sitting, half leaning against a ladder near the door, now rose and peeped out.

"Not a soul," he said.

"Very well; then come nearer to me, for I must speak low. We have received information that Russia is strengthening her defences towards the German frontier. The towns of Modlin, Demblin, and Warsaw are said to have been recently refortified, trenches have been dug, and earth embankments thrown up at many places; also new bridges are projected across the Vistula. Do you know whether all this is really the case?"

"It may be," returned Felicyan, indifferently. "Yes, I believe I heard something mentioned about bridges the other day, but I did not trouble my head further about the matter."

"Well, that is why I am here. It is of the utmost importance to our government to ascertain the exact truth of these reports, and this can only be done through some one who, speaking Polish and Russian, combines a thorough acquaintance with the country with the necessary technical military knowledge."

"And so you were chosen, Roman?"

"Yes, I was chosen; for, you see, I suited well for many reasons. Being a Pole was naturally an advantage, and

having a brother living within easy reach of Warsaw will make my comings and goings pass unnoticed."

"And what will be expected of you? What will you have to do in order to fulfil your mission?"

"Why, I must contrive to move about the country a good deal, and specially reconnoitre the course of the Vistula without attracting attention. I shall have to take notes and sketches, and have brought with me a portable photographic apparatus for taking off important points. I shall likewise have to go often to Warsaw, and, if possible, mix there in society."

"In the Russian society?"

"In the Russian society, of course, if I can obtain an entrance. Perhaps I may there come across persons who will be useful to me. I was considered suitable because, you see, I am something of a society man. I am reckoned a good dancer and all that sort of thing, and am usually rather a favorite with ladies."

Roman was scarcely a vain man, and he enumerated his social qualities without the smallest shade of what is usually called conceit.

"And you were obliged to go?—to undertake all this?"

"Obliged? Why, it was an honor, a distinction to be selected. All my comrades were wild with envy, and I should have been a fool to refuse such a chance."

"Why, oh, why did you do this, Roman?"

"Hush, Felician. Do not talk so loud. I told you it was not safe. Why did I do it? In order to serve my government."

"In order to serve the German government you make yourself into a spy?"

Roman flushed deeply.

"All means are fair in love and war. Would you not do it yourself to serve your country?"

Felician was silent for some moments, during which he thoughtfully tapped the worm-eaten side of the old winnowing-machine with his walking-cane.

"Yes," he said at last; "in order to serve my country I might turn my ploughshare into a sword," touching a

ploughshare alongside with the point of his boot. "Every Pole must be prepared to do so if the need arise. To regain his country's freedom, to expel the tyrants who for a hundred years have been usurping our rights, each and every one of us should be ready to shed his last drop of blood—to sacrifice everything, fortune, position, wife, children, to this end. But even to serve Poland I do not think I could bring myself to act a part, to lie and pretend to be something I am not in reality."

"You do not understand these things," cried Roman, excitedly; and now it was he who, forgetting the caution he had enjoined on his brother, had unconsciously raised his voice. But at once he checked himself, and resumed, in a lower key, "We cannot get on nowadays without such ruses. It is diamond cut diamond all the world over, and only ingenuity and dexterity carry the day. There is no need to call it by such an ugly name as spying. I call it military diplomacy."

"Very well, military diplomacy, if you will. Perhaps, as you say, I do not understand these things. But, spying or diplomacy, whichever it be, it matters not. Poland will be none the better of it."

"Poland will be none the worse," said Roman, rather doggedly.

Felicyan went on, unheeding :

"You are risking your life, your honor, everything, and for what? In order to serve one of Poland's enemies against the other."

"Russia is our real enemy."

"Our worst enemy perhaps, our most open enemy certainly, but Germany can never be the friend of Poland, and there are times when I ask myself whether Germany be not the greater foe of the two. If every Alexander is an ogre who unmercifully devours whoever thwarts him, is not your great chancellor a giant who is crushing out our life by the mere weight of his tremendous personality? He is less cruel, apparently, than the czar. He does not send us to Siberia, partly because he has got no Siberia to which to send us, but also because he is far too clever to

employ such vulgar means. His weapons are far more subtle, but also far more deadly, than the Russian weapons. The ogre subdues our bodies only, but the giant seeks to lead our spirit into bondage. His object is to undermine our language, our nationality, our faith. And he is succeeding. Look already at the difference between our countrymen of Posen and those about here. Though crushed and oppressed, we are still as good Poles as a century ago; whereas those others are gradually losing their language, their faith, under the influence of German teachers and German preachers. When Poland recovers her liberty—and she must recover it sooner or later—it will be too late for them, our Western countrymen: the German poison will have corrupted their blood, and they will be no longer Poles.”

Felicyan was not an eloquent man by nature, but every man can be eloquent when called upon to assert his deepest, holiest convictions. He had not taken care to moderate his voice.

“For mercy’s sake, Felicyan, do talk a little lower! I am almost sure that I heard some one speaking outside.”

“It is only the cow calling for her calf.”

Roman remained standing while he answered his brother.

“I am now a German officer,” he said, throwing back his head with a sort of nervous pride. “I could not have helped my country by remaining here, so my only chance of getting on in the world was to enter foreign service. I have sworn allegiance to the German emperor; I have chosen my career, and must stick to it.”

“True, but I wish your career had led you by a straighter path. I doubt whether I should ever have consented to your turning German if I had guessed all this. I cannot bear such secrets and intrigues, and I had always fancied that a soldier’s duties were as simple, as straightforward, as—”

“As a farmer’s? As simple as planting turnips and counting cows, perhaps,” interrupted Roman, sarcastically.

Felicyan was silent. His brother’s words had given him pain.

Roman was quick to recognize this. He took a few agitated turns in the shed between the ploughs and harrows, the silence broken at intervals only by the plaintive lowing of the bereaved cow. Then he came and sat down again on the winnowing machine close to his brother.

"Forgive me, Felciu," he said, putting his hand on the other's shoulder; and there was in both voice and gesture something soft and caressing, something boyish almost, that made it hard to keep long wrath with him. "I did not mean to hurt you, but it is not easy to make you understand how different is modern warfare from what it used to be. It is no longer a question of hand-to-hand engagements or of individual strength. The head, the brain, are everything now, and bone and muscle but its mere tools. Every campaign can be worked out beforehand on paper. But, in order to do so, a thorough knowledge of the enemy's offensive and defensive resources must be obtained."

Felician sighed again. "I dare say you are right, and it is no use wishing now; but I do wish it had been some one else to whom this mission had been confided—that the Germans had chosen some other tool; for you are only a tool, after all—a mere cat's-paw, made use of to pick the roasted chestnuts out of the fire, just as our poor simple peasants were turned into tools in 1870 in order to fight the French. They gained nothing by it, and neither will you."

"But personal honor, fame, glory?" asked Roman, with sparkling eyes. "Are they nothing? If I succeed in this mission my career is made. I shall be promoted over the heads of hundreds of my comrades, and my name will be widely mentioned. Are these no inducements?"

"I don't quite know," returned the elder brother, reflectively. "But then, you see, no one has ever talked about me, or is likely to do so; so perhaps I do not rightly understand what you mean by fame. I have never been able to comprehend why people are so fond of hearing themselves spoken about, or even how it can make them so happy to see their profiles stamped upon little pieces

of silver and copper. But perhaps there may be really something in it. I can remember myself what a curious sensation it was when I saw my own name printed in the *Flock Gazette* last year, on having gained the second prize for cauliflower at the horticultural exhibition. It made me feel quite—quite celebrated for nearly a whole day. That is how you are always feeling, I suppose, as if you had gained a cauliflower prize, or were trying for one. But we are very different in our tastes—we always were.”

“Yes,” returned Roman, musingly; “we were very different. Odd, is it not, for two brothers to be so unlike? Now this quiet country life, which suits you so well, would be simply a lingering death to me. I cannot live without movement, competition, strife. It is the very breath of my nostrils. But you are so much more contented” (prosaic he was nearly saying), “you have no ambition, Felician.”

Felician laughed—a loud, genial, slightly boisterous laugh.

“Oh, yes, I have my ambitions, too; I told you already that the height of my ambition was to have twenty-four cows!”

CHAPTER VI.

THE SWIENCONE.

"He was a man
Of an unbounded stomach."

—*Henry VIII.*

PATTERING steps were now heard in the muddy yard.
"Some one is really coming this time," said Roman, starting again nervously to his feet.

It was only little Kostus, who peeped into the shed in order to tell them that the Swiencone was served.

"Remember," said Roman to his brother, as they retraced their steps towards the house, preceded by the small messenger, wildly gambolling in joyful anticipation of the coming delicacies—"remember, not a word to any one of what I have told you."

"Not even to my wife? May I not tell Hala?"

"On no account! that might be the destruction of my plans. Not a woman in ten thousand can keep a secret."

"Then what am I to say to her? how explain your presence here?"

"Tell her, as I told you yesterday, that I have come to spend Easter with you. She will find nothing strange about that, I suppose?"

Felicyan himself had found such explanation quite natural last night, but now, burdened and embarrassed by the important disclosure just made to him, he had some difficulty in readjusting his mental focus.

"But if you stay on here indefinitely for some weeks or months, what explanation am I then to give her?"

"Oh, that is easy enough," said Roman, smiling. "Say that I have become so fond of my native land that I cannot bear to tear myself away. Say that my health re-

quires the change of country air after my severe studies last winter. Say that I am looking out for a Polish wife. Say anything you please except the truth. She will believe whatever you tell her."

There was a light frown on Felicyan's open brow as they re-entered the house.

In the big saloon, where was spread the Swiencone, the family was assembled, seven members in all, but a dozen chairs were drawn round the table, for on Easter Sunday and on the two days following stray neighbors might be expected to drop in promiscuously to exchange the usual Paschal salutations. The Starowolskis had not many neighbors within easy driving distance, so it was probable that they would be alone to-day, most people remaining at home on Sunday to preside over their own festive board.

Old Pan Nicorowicz—in hand the inevitable fly-murdering instrument—had come into the room. He rarely got up before midday, and was never to be seen otherwise attired than in his shabby Turkish dressing-gown. He had not seen Roman last night, for he went to bed as early as the flies, and now stared at him with vacant, unrecognizing gaze.

"Do you not remember Roman? my brother Roman, grandfather?" said Felicyan. "He has come from Germany to spend Easter with us."

"Roman—little Roman, who used to help me to kill the flies?" mumbled the old man, putting out a trembling hand.

"Not very little now," said Roman, as he took the yellow, transparent fingers in his own, and looked down at the shrivelled parchment figure.

"Ah!" said the grandfather, relapsing into apathy, letting the hand drop inertly again. Presently, though, when they were sitting at table, a momentary flash of intelligence seemed to dawn upon his face, and, bending across the board towards Roman, who sat opposite, he said:

"From Germany? You have come from Germany? Are there—are there many flies in Germany?"

"Not as many as in Poland," answered Roman, with difficulty suppressing an inclination to laugh.

"Ah! I always said so. There is no country like our own for flies. No flies are as big, as black, as numerous, as the Polish flies!"

He spoke with enthusiasm, like an ardent hunter expatiating on the merits of roe-deer and wild boar, or as a passionate angler may sing the praises of pink-fleshed salmon and crimson-speckled trout.

"What will you take?" Hala now asked her brother-in-law. "Shall we first attack a roast sucking-pig? or do you prefer to begin with ham?"

"Let us eat the calf's head," said little Kostus, greedily.

"We shall leave the calf for to-morrow," said his mother, reprovingly. "There are always most guests on the Monday. Both the Koritowskis and the Padlewskis have promised to come, and the calf's head is our most ornamental dish."

At this moment a carriage was seen to drive past the window.

"A visit! a visit!" cried Luba, clapping her hands and running to the window. "Oh, it is only that tiresome Pan Rabowski!" she added, in a tone of disappointment, as she recognized the horses.

"Oh, of course, he was sure to come!" said Hala, rather irritably. "He always turns up whenever there is anything upon the table."

"He is exactly like a bloodhound," said Luba, pertyly. "I am sure he smells the dishes ten miles off. What a first-rate pointer he would have made!"

"Hush, children!" said Felicyan. He often called his wife and sister so. "It is not right to talk thus of our guests. What will Roman think of our Polish hospitality? Every guest is welcome at Stara-Wola.

Despite this reproof, Felicyan himself did not seem to be over-delighted as he rose to welcome his visitor, and there was no rapture in his manner as he responded to the new-comer's effusive greetings.

"It is very good of you to have taken the trouble to drive four miles on these muddy roads in order to partake of our humble Swiencone," was all he said.

"Come? why, of course I should have come had the distance been twice as great and the mud twice as deep," said Rabowski, kissing Felicyan warmly on both cheeks according to Polish fashion. "I could not refuse myself the pleasure of breaking an Easter egg with my beloved friends. Not for a fortune would I have hurt your feelings by staying away. You may always count on Rabowski. He is not the man to forget his friends. Your servant, Pani Starowska," he continued, raising Hala's hand to his lips, while he cast the glance of an expert over the well-spread board. "Pani Lubormira, I lay myself at your feet. You are looking blooming as a rose."

Felicyan introduced his brother, who was at once favored with a rapturous hand-shake.

"Delightful!" said Rabowski, ecstatically. "Come to spend Easter at home? How sweet are such family ties! There is nothing so beautiful, so enviable as family life to a poor old bachelor like myself without kith or kin. How good of your brother to tear himself away from the glories of his military profession! So he has really come to spend Easter here. Delightful!"

"Let me give you something," said Felicyan, hastily, wishing to cut short these inconvenient effusions.

"Thanks, thanks! I have only come to break an egg with you according to our ancient national custom. Yes, I will eat a mouthful, only a mouthful. And, well, well—if you absolutely insist upon it, I shall not refuse a glass of your excellent brandy to begin with. The sort flavored with caraway is a first-rate thing for settling the stomach before eating."

Pan Rabowski was a tall, meagre man, ruddy-faced and ruddy-haired, to whom a pointed nose and chin, and close-cropped hair, gave somewhat the appearance of a bald-headed fox. Fox-like, too, were his small green eyes, ever roving restlessly from side to side, taking stock of everything within his range of observation. A spendthrift in his youth, like so many of his countrymen, cards and dice had long since made away with the greater part of his fortune. But if he had lost his money, he had

gained a good deal of wisdom—the sort of wisdom which teaches a man never to lose sight of his own interests, and, this object in view, to trade upon the good-nature, the friendship, the compassion, or the weakness of his fellow-creatures. Whenever there was a dinner, a christening, a wedding, or a dance, within a radius of twenty miles, Pan Rabowski was sure to turn up in the nick of time; and, as Luba had pertly remarked, it almost seemed as if he scented a banquet from afar, just as a pointer tracks the game by its olfactory organ alone. Few doors ever succeeded in closing themselves against him, for there was in his whole demeanor a certain calm impudence, an incapacity to comprehend that he could be otherwise than a welcome guest wherever he appeared, which mostly disconcerted all attempts to shake him off. No amount of cold water could succeed in damping his innate self-confidence. It all rolled off like dew from a cabbage leaf.

"Thanks," he said, tossing down the liqueur which Felicyan had gone to fetch, there being none of that particular kind on the table. "Another glass? Well, if I must, I must, I suppose; I can never say no to my friends."

"Let me give you some ham," said Hala, stretching out her hand for his plate.

"Some ham? By-and-by I shall not refuse it—after I have made acquaintance with that splendid calf's head."

"Mamma says that we are not to eat the calf's head to-day," Kostus was beginning to say, but his words were cut short by a vigorous pinch from his aunt, who sat beside him.

"A slice of the cheek, please; and I suppose I shall have to eat the tongue, if only to draw comparisons between it and the tongue I tasted this forenoon at Porotyn. I stepped in there for a minute on my way here, in order not to make them jealous. Madame Koritowska might have taken it amiss if I had driven past without entering. A little more aspic—the yellow—if I may trouble you."

"Nothing new going on at Porotyn?" asked Felicyan, when he had for the moment satisfied his guest's numerous wants.

"Nothing new," said Rabowski, rather grievously, "ex-

cept that they have changed their cook. The old one took to drinking, it appears, and had to be turned away. This new one does not seem half to understand the making of pastry and the glazing of hams. I never pay compliments, you know; but, honestly, their calf's head, though a trifle more fleshy, was not nearly as delicately prepared as this one. Really, I must take a second helping; it well deserves the distinction." This with a slight bow towards Madame Starowolska, who smiled rather constrainedly in return. The old grandfather, who had long finished eating, now rose stealthily to his feet, and began prowling noiselessly round the table, eying askance two or three flies, which, attracted by the viands, were buzzing about the dishes.

"Our old customs are dying out, alas!" resumed Radowski, with his mouth full of calf's tongue. "I cannot recollect an Easter when there were so few Swiencones in the neighborhood. So many houses shut up this year. Some families are in mourning, others gone abroad. By the by," he added, apparently struck by a sudden thought, "do you know Countess Biruta Massalowska? Has she been here to-day?"

No, none of them had ever heard of Countess Biruta Massalowska.

"But I met her carriage on the road not an hour's distance from here."

"Three remarkably fine bays?" asked Roman, who had not yet spoken.

"Dressed in green velvet?" said Luba, eagerly.

"And with a golden bonnet?" added Hala.

"The same. But what can she have been doing over here? Whom can she have been visiting?"

"She was in church," explained Felicyan.

"But she has another church far nearer her. Ah, now I remember hearing that the bridge over the little river was carried away in last flood, so that explains her presence here."

"But who is this Countess Massalowska?" questioned Luba, her curiosity not nearly satisfied.

"You have never heard of her? Why, she is the most remarkable woman at Warsaw just now. A slice of that excellent *baba*, if you will be so good."

"We never go to Warsaw," said Felicyan, as he passed the *baba*.

"Every one is talking about her. She is the richest, the most eccentric woman in the country. The widow of Count Massalowski, her uncle. She only came here a few weeks ago about the sale of her estates."

"Ah, a widow," said Roman. "But she was not in mourning."

"No, that is just one of her eccentricities. Count Massalowski died about a year ago, and she wore black for six months only, choosing to regard herself as a niece rather than as a widow. 'I am in mourning for my uncle,' she used to say when questioned on the subject."

"Was that the Count Massalowski who was sentenced to Siberia about ten years ago?" asked Felicyan.

"It can hardly be the same, for this Count Massalowski held an important post under the Russian government till shortly before his death, and was, I believe, a great favorite of the late czar."

"Then does his widow belong to the Russian party?"

"She belongs to whatever she pleases, and moves alike in Russian as in Polish saloons, I hear. Her husband—or uncle—was one of our few countrymen in Russian service, and some people think it likely that her second husband will be a Russian; General Vassiljef is wild about her, they say."

Roman started violently, for just at that moment a sharp report like a pistol-shot resounded alongside of him. It was only the old grandfather, who, having espied an unfortunate fly feasting on the crumbs of *baba* on the tablecloth, had stretched his arm over Roman's shoulder, adroitly putting an end to its existence. An unsightly black stain on the white damask alone marked the spot where it had been. The other persons at the table had not even moved at the familiar sound; but Roman, nervous and impressionable by nature, was rendered doubly

so at present, from the consciousness of having an important secret to conceal. He had changed color almost like a woman.

"Who is General Vassiljef?" he was about to inquire, when he had recovered from his slight perturbation; but just at that moment the entrance of a new guest, the village priest, gave another turn to the conversation, and soon after Pan Rabowski took his leave; he had still far to go, as he intended to partake of two more Swiencones at least before nightfall. Countess Biruta Massalowska was mentioned no more that day.

"Dear old stupid Felicyan," mused Roman that evening, as he was preparing to retire to rest; "I shall never get him to understand about this business. He is as simple-minded as a child about some things. No wonder, too, spending his life pottering about the farm-yard. But he is an awfully good fellow all the same. But for him I should not now be on the high-road to fame!"

Luba meanwhile was standing before one of the mirrors in the big saloon. She held a candle in her hand, and was eyeing her lilac gown with a dissatisfied air.

"Come here, Hala," she said; "I don't think my dress fits right after all."

"Perhaps it is only the fault of the fat looking-glass," suggested her sister; "it makes every one look short and broad."

"No, it is not only the glass," returned Luba, running to the second mirror, "for, see, I look just as bad in this one. Look at it yourself, and say if there is not something wrong about the cut of the shoulders and the gores about the waist. I look exactly like a badly tied-up parcel."

Hala looked critically at her sister. Certainly there did seem to be something wrong about the bodice which had previously escaped her notice.

"But it seemed all right yesterday when the tailor brought it home," she said aloud.

"Yes," said Luba, dolefully, "so it did. I cannot think what has come over the dress since yesterday."

CHAPTER VII.

TOADSTOOLS.

"The common growth of mother-earth
Suffices me."

—WORDSWORTH.

NEXT morning at the breakfast hour, Roman, peeping into the dining-room, found it empty. Felicyan had gone down to the village on some errand, and Hala was still engaged in the storeroom giving out provisions for the day. So, the morning being fine, he strolled out on to the veranda to while away the time over a cigar.

Here, seated on the steps, he found Luba surrounded by four shaggy mongrels, to whom she was gravely administering small pieces of the blessed *baba* she held on a plate. Dressed in the old blue merino, and with a bunch of white hepaticas stuck in her hair, she looked much prettier than she had done yesterday in the disfiguring lilac.

Seeing Roman approach, she endeavored to rise in some confusion, but was frustrated in her attempt by the importunate Burek, who, utterly devoid of all canine tact, had reared upright, and, with a forepaw on each of her shoulders, was looking earnestly into her face.

One of the other dogs seeing this favorable combination of circumstances, had meanwhile quietly abstracted a large piece of cake from the dish.

"Zupan! you thief!" exclaimed Luba, shaking her hand at the culprit, who had retired with his booty to the shelter of a neighboring bush.

"Let me hold the dish for you," said Roman, taking it from off her lap. "Do your dogs get cake for breakfast every morning?"

"This is their Swiencone," returned Luba; "do you

not know that each dog must eat a portion of the blessed food at Easter? That prevents them from going mad during the year."

"And do we eat Swiencone, too, to keep us sane?" inquired Roman, with slight raillery in his tone.

Luba stared at him with a rather puzzled expression.

"Of course we eat the blessed food to keep us healthy and happy—to avert all misfortunes from the house and the family."

"Then by rights I should long since have been blind, crippled, and raving mad," returned Roman, "for it is eleven whole years since I have partaken of this Easter repast."

"You have no Swiencones at Berlin?" asked Luba, in a tone of commiseration.

"None," he answered; "and we get on very well without them," he was about to add, but a look at the girl's ingenuous face checked the words on his lips. She would probably not have comprehended him, and what good was there in disturbing the patriarchal superstitions to which her simple spirit clung?

Kostus and Zosia now appeared round the corner of the house dragging by the collar a fifth young mongrel, piebald and shaggy.

"Aunt Luba! Aunt Luba!" the children shouted together, "Sroka* does not want to eat Swiencone. She ran away and hid herself in the barn."

"Sroka is very timid," explained Luba; "she never will eat in public unless we coax her very much. Sroka," she went on tenderly, taking hold of the animal's front paws, on which the dry mud-pellets rattled together like a profusion of bracelets—"Sroka, my darling, you will eat a tiny piece of *baba* to please me."

But the shamefaced piebald turned away its head like a shy child, hiding its eyes on Luba's lap in agonized self-consciousness.

"To please Aunt Luba," said Zosia, insinuatingly.

* *Sroka*—magpie.

"Only a tiny piece," repeated the young girl, holding the cake to the dog's mouth.

She attained her object by dint of patient caresses, and Sroka, released, ran off to conceal her canine blushes in seclusion.

Roman had witnessed this little scene with languid amusement. He could not help remarking what a pretty picture she made with the large rough dogs grouped about her. The dish was now empty, and, laying it aside, he came and sat down on the stone balustrade opposite Luba.

"Do you always live here?" he asked, looking down at her, as with one hand she brushed off the crumbs of *baba* clinging to her dark-blue dress.

"Ever since papa had his last stroke, six years ago. We used to live at Pukow, but now my brother has taken over the farm, as papa is no longer able to look after it."

"And was it gayer at Pukow than here?"

"Oh, no!" said Luba, with decision. "It's much more amusing here than at Pukow. I like Stara-Wola far better."

"Why do you like it better?"

"Because it is so much more lively. There are Hala and the children and the river here, and the forest, too, is much nearer than at Pukow. And then there are the dogs. We only had one dog at Pukow, and it was quite deaf, poor thing, so it hardly counted as a companion, you see."

"Hardly," he echoed, dryly.

"And papa, too, likes Stara-Wola better because of the flies. They are much more numerous here."

Roman now laughed outright.

"I should scarcely have ranked the flies among the charms of Stara-Wola. They are not very attractive creatures."

Luba considered for a moment in her peculiar grave fashion before answering.

"Perhaps not to every one, but poor papa has no other

pleasure but in killing flies. He cannot amuse himself as we do."

"But what are your amusements? What do you do all the year round?"

"Oh, there are plenty of amusements. In summer we sometimes go to row on the river, and then there is the bathing-hut in the creek that Felicyan built two years ago. The creek is full of water-lilies in summer," she put in, parenthetically. "And in autumn we go to the forest and look for toadstools. You have no idea how amusing it is to look for toadstools."

"Yes?" said Roman, interrogatively. "And what sort of toadstools are there here?"

"Ever so many different kinds," replied Luba, warming with her subject. "There are the big brown toadstools that we cut up and dry for the winter; then the little orange ones that look like apricots; the bear's-paws that resemble sponges; then the round white puff-balls that are so good fried in lard, and a lot of others besides. There were not nearly so many different sorts at Pukow."

"Really!" said Roman, who began to feel almost interested in the toadstools.

"And only fancy, last autumn we discovered several real mushrooms in the lower meadow—white mushrooms lined with pink. Perhaps there will be some more this year."

"Can we not go and look for some after breakfast?" said Roman; "you have really inspired me with the wish to gather toadstools."

At this Luba went off into an irrepressible fit of laughter, which lasted a whole minute, disclosing two rows of rather large but white and even teeth. She laughed so heartily that the tears stood in her eyes. But she checked herself suddenly, remembering that it was not decorous to laugh so unrestrainedly before this young man, who was, after all, a stranger, even though the brother of her sister's husband.

"I beg your pardon," she said, wiping her eyes, and looking up at Roman, who had not at all perceived the

point of the joke, "but really I could not help it. Toadstools in April! What can you have been thinking of? There will be none before August at the very soonest."

Roman now laughed as well.

"I am afraid I am very ignorant of country matters, and you will have to instruct me. What is there in the forest, then, if there are no toadstools in April?"

"There are both blue and pink hepaticas (we had only blue ones at Pukow), and large clumps of white anemones; and the ferns are just beginning to uncurl, and maybe the violets will be already in flower on the bank at the edge of the wood. We might go with the children to look for violets some day, though violets are not near so amusing as toadstools. One violet is exactly like the other; there is not the same variety and excitement as there is in hunting toadstools;" and again Luba, with difficulty, repressed a smile at thought of Roman's curious error just now. "What a pity that you will not be here in August!" she added, thoughtlessly.

"Who knows!" said Roman, mysteriously; "who knows whether I may not still be here in August!"

Luba colored slightly without exactly knowing why.

"But you have not told me yet what you do in winter?" resumed Roman, after a pause. "When there are neither violets nor toadstools to gather, it must be very dull at Stara-Wola."

"Dull! Why, winter is the very gayest time in the country. We can often go out sleighing from November to March; and when the sleigh road is good, we get so many visits—sometimes as many as three or four visits in one month."

"And do you never dance? Do you never go to balls?"

"No, I have never been to a real ball, exactly; but at every country-house they dance whenever people come together and there are enough partners. We were four couples here in the Christmas week, and we danced until after midnight. Are there many balls at Berlin?"

It was now Roman's turn to smile.

"Dozens of them! Scores!" he said.

"And you go to them all?"

"Not exactly; that would be rather too hard work. But I cannot escape going to a good many. I went to at least a couple of dozen last season. A man who wants to get on in the world must keep himself before the eyes of society."

"How happy you must be!" exclaimed Luba, earnestly.

"Yes, I should like to go to a ball—a real ball—for once, and to dance Mazur all night. Do they dance Mazur at Berlin?"

Roman denied it.

"Then you must almost have forgotten how to dance it yourself. Are you sure that you remember it?"

Roman was quite convinced that he had completely forgotten it. In fact, he did not feel sure he had ever learned to dance it at all.

"But you are a Pole!" said Luba, looking at him almost with a little horror in her wide-open black eyes. "A Pole should be ashamed of not knowing his national dance."

"So I am, terribly ashamed," said Roman; "but, you see, I never had any one to teach me. Will you not charitably remedy these defects in my education by giving me dancing-lessons? Will you not teach me the Mazur? You will not find me a very awkward pupil, I hope." And he looked at her with a humorous expression of childish penitence in his darkly fringed blue eyes.

Luba laughed, but colored again more brightly than before.

"I will show you the step some time if Hala will play a Mazur for us," she answered, a little demurely.

Madame Starowolska, holding a large bunch of keys, now came out of the house to say that breakfast was ready.

"And where is Felicyan?" asked Roman, when he had saluted his sister-in-law.

"Oh, that is a secret," she said, with lowered voice, looking round to see if the children were not within ear-shot. "I do not know whether I ought to tell you; but if you will promise to be discreet—"

"I shall be as silent as the grave."

"Well, Felicyan has ordered a little donkey-cart for Zosia and Kostus, and has gone to the village to see if the paint is already dry. I hope it is—for it is so difficult to keep from talking about it, and it would spoil all the fun if they were to find out. What a terrible thing it is to have to keep a secret!"

"Hala," said Luba, a day or two later, when the two sisters were sitting alone, "have you noticed what lovely patent-leather shoes your brother-in-law wears?"

"Lovely," endorsed Hala, readily.

"And such an elegant pointed shape!—quite different from Felicyan's. Why does Felicyan always wear such ugly boots?"

Hala did not look quite pleased. She had been thinking the same thing herself; but she scarcely cared to hear her thoughts echoed by Luba. Certainly Felicyan did wear very ugly boots; they made his foot appear twice as big as Roman's.

"Felicyan requires stronger boots for tramping about in the mud," she said, a little shortly. "A farmer cannot afford to dress like a fashionable gentleman."

"What a pity!" said Luba; and some moments later she added, as though pursuing a train of thought—"Do all German officers wear their hair parted down the middle like that?"

"I suppose so. But I have never seen any German officers before."

"It is very becoming," said Luba, musingly.

"I wonder how long he is going to remain?" said Hala, a little later. "I hope a fortnight at least. Felicyan will be so disappointed if he goes away sooner. You have no idea how fond he is of Roman."

"Oh, he is quite sure to stay much longer than a fortnight!" exclaimed Luba, with conviction.

Madame Starowska looked at her sister with a little surprise.

"What makes you think that? Did he tell you so?"

Luba now became slightly embarrassed.

"He told me—at least not exactly, but he said something about wanting to go with me to the forest to gather toadstools: he is very fond of toadstools, it seems. And then when I told him that there were no toadstools before August, he said—'Who knows whether I may not still be here!'"

"He said that?—he said it to you?"

"Yes; and do you know, Hala, he has quite forgotten how to dance Mazur, and he asked me to teach him the step. What am I to do about it? Would it be proper, do you think?"

"Why, teach him the Mazur, of course!" briskly returned Madame Starowska, who had been scrutinizing her sister's face. "There can be nothing wrong about showing the step to Felicyan's own brother. He is almost like your relation."

"Not quite," said Luba, still confused. "He is not really my brother—and one can never tell; he might—" She broke off suddenly, hiding her flushed face on Hala's shoulder.

"He might," repeated Hala, more decidedly. "And he is very handsome, and is sure to make a brilliant career, Felicyan says. By all means teach him the Mazur!"

CHAPTER VIII.

BIRUTA.

"She moves a goddess and she looks a queen."

—POPE : *Iliad*.

SCARCELY sixteen, Biruta Massalowska had left the convent in order to wed her uncle, brother to her own father, and nearly forty years older than herself. Count Massalowski, one of the few distinguished Poles who had cared to enter the Russian diplomatic service, had long been regarded as a confirmed bachelor, when suddenly, at the age of fifty-five, an unforeseen contingency decided him upon entering the matrimonial state. His elder brother, having foolishly compromised himself by agitations against the government, was sentenced to deportation to Siberia, but managed to evade his fate by a timely flight to Switzerland, where he shortly died.

The very considerable family estates, after having been sequestered by government, were finally bestowed upon the younger brother, who, in contradistinction to the elder, had always been *persona grata* at the court of St. Petersburg.

But the elder one had left an only daughter, who had now become penniless ; and the surviving count, hardened old *diplomat* as he was, had not yet perfectly succeeded in getting rid of his conscience. He had not been on very good terms with his brother ; but, in common justice and honor, he could not leave his brother's child in want, the more especially as he himself had profited by her misfortune.

His first thought had been to adopt his niece, if it did not prove too troublesome—the little Biruta, whom he dimly remembered as a fair-haired child, to whom he had

sometimes given sugar-plums, which she had accepted with that languid condescension that even in childhood had marked her actions. Provided, therefore, with a large bag of sweetmeats, he one day appeared at the convent at Geneva, where his niece had been put to complete her education.

It was, however, something of a surprise to Count Massalowski when the parlor-door opened to admit a tall, regal-looking girl—regal-looking, even in the plain convent garb of austere black merino. He had not seen his niece for fully five years, and had hardly contemplated the possibility of her having passed meanwhile from child to womanhood. He hastily concealed the bag of sugar-plums, and felt for a moment considerably more embarrassed than he had ever done in the presence of a crowned head, and the crowned heads he had seen were numerous. She hardly looked like the sort of girl to be patronized or adopted; rather it was she who seemed to patronize him, as she offered her hand with an imperial gesture.

Nevertheless, Count Massalowski did not just at once relinquish the idea of adoption, and after some days' indecision he broached the question, explaining to Biruta that, his object being to do her justice, he would adopt her formally, if the czar's consent could be obtained. By this arrangement she would, after his own death, inherit her father's property.

Biruta had listened to her uncle without any appearance of excitement, as he explained all this very circumstantially. The only impediment he could foresee might be a refusal, on the czar's part, to let the daughter of a political criminal succeed to his fortune.

"Then the czar might possibly refuse to let you adopt me?" said Biruta, when he had finished speaking.

"He might," said Count Massalowski, composedly, feeling that he would have satisfied his conscience by having made the offer. "Of course he might prevent me from adopting you—an adoption, in such a case, being an act which always requires to be formally legalized by the sovereign."

"Yes, I see," said the girl, after a thoughtful pause. "But he could not prevent you from marrying me, I suppose?"

Never in his whole life had the old *diplomate* felt as utterly confounded as at this audacious suggestion on the part of a convent girl of sixteen. "I—marry you?" he could only gasp.

"Why not?" said Biruta, rising to her feet and drawing up her tall, commanding figure to its fullest extent. "Why not, uncle? Look at me. Am I not big enough to be married? It would be ever so much simpler, and I would much rather be married than adopted."

He looked at her for a few bewildered minutes, and then he, too, began to ask himself, why not? Marriage between uncle and niece is legal in Russia, and certainly she was right in saying that she was big enough to be married. Big enough! Why, she was already now, at sixteen, fully taller than himself. Matrimony had never entered into the programme of his life, to be sure; but that was, after all, no reason against changing his mind at fifty-three, if there were good reasons for so doing, and there were good reasons he recognized. Matrimony, which is the ruin of young *diplomates*, is the making of old ones, as he had often had occasion to remark. A high diplomatic position is alway graced and consolidated by the presence of a suitable wife; and where could he find one more suitable for the purpose? A wife would certainly be more useful to him than a daughter at the present juncture of his life; and, as she had said, it would be infinitely less troublesome to put into execution. No trouble at all, in fact. He had nothing further to do but accept the offer of this tall, distinguished-looking girl, who, with her large gray eyes fixed seriously upon his, was asking her uncle to marry her.

The matter was speedily arranged, for nobody had any interest in preventing it. Rather, the young girl's guardians were relieved of the disagreeable responsibility of taking care of a penniless orphan, and only too thankful to hand her over to this distinguished, if somewhat antiquated, suitor.

Their marriage—if marriage it can be called—was not an unhappy one, for, if not precisely an ideal husband, Count Massalowski was certainly a very good uncle. He treated his wife kindly and courteously, and bestowed jewels upon her with the same lavish hand that had formerly dispensed sugar-plums. He instructed her very carefully in the intricate code of social and diplomatic etiquette, with a frank cynicism of which few men would have been capable towards a girl of sixteen, and he found in her an apt scholar.

Under his guidance, Biruta's natural qualities were developed and educated to an extraordinary degree, and at twenty she was gifted with infinitely more graceful self-possession than most women have acquired by the age of forty, having acquired to perfection that sublime disregard of all social rules which can only result from their thorough comprehension.

Admiration was, of course, lavished upon her, for Count Massalowski was far too worldly wise to fall into the ridiculous mistake of allowing himself to be jealous of a wife young enough to be his own daughter, nay, granddaughter; besides, he had tutored her as carefully on this as on other points, and, a practised student of human nature, he knew that Biruta was a woman to be trusted.

"I wish my wife to be admired," he often repeated. "It is as necessary a part of her position as her jewels or her carriage, and the less you seem to care for admiration the more you will get. As for love, I will not insult your understanding, my dear, by telling you that it should be avoided like the Asiatic pest or a freshly painted door. A woman of your intelligence needs only look around to realize the disastrous effects of this pernicious epidemic. Believe me, I have tried it, and the game is not worth the candle."

Biruta did look around her, with those large, glassy eyes of hers, so transparent and yet so inscrutable. And what did she see? Women hollow-cheeked and hollow-eyed, their beauty prematurely faded, corroded by a deadly poison called love. Broken-hearted women, whom love

had deprived of all capacity for enjoyment in this world ; other women whom it had deprived of wealth, of rank, of position ; reputations destroyed or impaired, constitutions undermined, friendships snapped asunder, and all through love. Men driven to acts of folly and desperation, their days cut off in the prime of life ; the revolver or the poison-cup pressed into their hand by Love—Love, the murderer. For one happy person a hundred made wretched by Love. Yes ; decidedly, her uncle was right. The game was not worth the candle.

Love ! Did she even know the meaning of the word ? Hardly, for a certain indolence of character had made it easy for her to escape its singeing flames. She had to make no sacrifice, to undergo no inward struggle, in order to keep lovers aloof. A chilling glance from her blue-gray eye was sufficient to discourage the boldest, and this glance, in course of time, had grown to second nature. No man had, as yet, been able to boast of having seen Biruta's eyes lighted up by passion or softened by emotion. If she possessed a heart, she had not herself found it out ; it was like an instrument whose finest strings have not yet been played upon.

Their married life had been mostly spent between Paris and St. Petersburg ; then, when failing health had forced Count Massalowski to resign his official position, they had travelled about Europe from one fashionable health-resort to the other, in vain quest of a specific against death.

Biruta buried her husband at Nice, with the becoming grace and dignity which he himself had taught her, making neither affected pretence of overwhelming grief nor indecent display of satisfaction at being released from a bondage which most women would have found very irksome. Then, after wearing mourning for six months, as befitted a niece, she returned to Russia in order to effect the sale of her very extensive properties in Russian Poland, which, according to their marriage settlement, had reverted to herself. No children having been born of the marriage, she had only herself to consider, and she wished to be perfectly free to arrange her life as best suited her-

self henceforth. How and where this should be she had not yet consciously asked herself; but she did not feel drawn to settle permanently in Russia—in Russian Poland least of all—on account of the poverty of the land and its disorganized social condition. It would be wiser, too, she thought, to turn into money her father's acres, lest her right to the inheritance should ever be called in question; when, therefore, a cousin of Count Massalowski, the next male heir, made overtures respecting the family estates, which he wished to acquire, Biruta was very willing to fall in with his views on the subject.

At present Biruta resembled a plant—a fern, let us call it—which has lain all winter beneath the snow, incapable of independent action, and which now, with the arrival of spring, is slowly thawing back to life again. The thawing process was far from being complete as yet; it progressed slowly, sometimes by fits and starts, sometimes not at all, just according as the indolent or the energetic side of her character happened to be uppermost.

Sometimes she would spend whole days on the *chaise-longue*, yawning over the last French novel, in the oppressive atmosphere of a narcotically-perfumed boudoir; then, suddenly, she would order her horse to be saddled, and would gallop for miles across country, regardless of wind and weather. Some days she seemed scarce able to rouse herself to the effort of penning two lines of acceptance or invitation; and then, again, there would come days when, rising with the lark, she stood till sunset at the painting-easel, conscious of neither weariness nor hunger, and laying on the color with as fierce an energy as though working for her livelihood. Music, painting, society, literature, she resorted to alternately, taking up each pursuit with enthusiasm, and laying it aside with disgust. She had as yet failed to discover any one pursuit capable of absorbing and compelling her permanent interest.

If Countess Massalowska had been a poor woman, no doubt she would have been a happy one; the necessity of providing for her daily bread would have afforded scope for talents and energy that are thrown away on the rich.

What she lacked was an object in life, and, clear-sighted and logical as she was, the hollow shams which suffice to so many similarly placed women could never long have satisfied her. This was the true secret of that strange mixture of indolence and energy in her character—the consciousness of possessing great power, combined with inability to direct it to a suitable object.

What was the use of doing for herself a thing which money would procure without personal exertion?

This question lay at the root of all Countess Massalowska's hitherto unfinished work. Thus, after taking lessons on the harp with feverish energy during about half a year, she one day paused and asked herself, Why? If she wished to hear music, was it not much simpler to buy tickets for the concerts of such artists as have devoted their lives to this study? This conclusion once reached, the harp was relegated to the lumber-room. Then she began to write a novel, but with the same result. What was the use of writing books to amuse other people, when so many other people were ready to write books to amuse her? Nor did she find painting much more satisfactory—witness the many unfinished sketches that littered the studio. When she could buy good paintings by the score, why waste her time in producing indifferent ones? What, in fact, was the use of doing anything at all which others could do for her as well or better?

It would have required some really grand object, some powerful incentive, to rouse her dormant faculties. Then, indeed, Countess Massalowska might have been capable of doing things which not one among ten thousand women can do. She was made of the stuff of which are fashioned Jeanne d'Arcs. Perhaps also Charlotte Cordays.

Was she a good woman?

This was a question which no one—not even her intimates—could have answered; for her beauty, position, and eccentricity combined, made up such a bewildering *ensemble* as to defy analysis. Moreover, she was rich—rich enough to carry off all vices and all virtues. No vice could be odious when set in so much gold; no virtue ridiculous when clothed so gorgeously.

CHAPTER IX.

DÉJEÛNER DANSANT.

"Le style c'est l'homme."

—BUFFON.

It was in the house of General Gurko, the civil and military governor of Russian Poland, that Roman Starawolski made the acquaintance of Countess Biruta Massalowska. He had gone to Warsaw in order to witness the Russian Easter festivities, which, according to the Greek calendar, fall a week later than those of the Latin Church. He had brought one or two introductions, which speedily made him acquainted with the *jeunesse dorée* of Warsaw, both Polish and Russian, which frequented the neutral ground of the Klub Mysliwski, this being about the only place in Warsaw where a potent common interest sometimes binds together the younger and more frivolous members of these two antagonistic races.

Roman, an expert rider and an adept in the jargon of the turf, was welcomed as a kindred spirit, and soon regarded as one of themselves—all who knew him being miles from suspecting that this elegant, almost dandified, young man had any more serious object in visiting the capital than the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of that bugbear *ennui*. He had come to Russia in order to visit his brother, which was very natural and proper; but seeing that the said brother resided at a dull country place, was it not still more natural that he should seek to break the monotony of his visit by an occasional trip to town? Yes; Roman must often come to Warsaw, the young exquisites agreed among themselves. He was a capital fellow all round, and a great acquisition to their circle. An introduction to the governor, and an invitation to a *déjeuner dansant* to his house, followed as a mat-

ter of course; and so, without apparent effort, Roman slipped easily and smoothly into the very heart of Russian society as represented at Warsaw.

The old castle, former residence of the Polish kings, and now inhabited by the governor of Russian Poland, General Gurko, lies on an eminence on the left bank of the Vistula.

Terraced gardens, just now breaking out into leaf and blossom, lead down to the water's edge, where are stabled the three hundred steeds of the governor's Cossack body-guard.

It is afternoon, and as the day is radiantly beautiful, the windows stand open to let in the violet-scented air. The guests are assembled in a suite of rooms overhanging the gardens: old, venerable apartments now stripped of many costly treasures which once adorned them, yet rich in memories of the past—gilded over with the reflection of a vanished majesty, of which nothing can rob them.

General Gurko's guests belong almost exclusively to the military and official class. There are a great many Russian officers, whose uniforms give character to the assembly, quite overpowering the subordinate number of black coats. Of Poles only such are present as are in some way connected with or dependent on the Russian government; those only that hope to obtain something by their presence here, or who would have feared to lose something by their absence, have thought fit to accept the governor's hospitality. No Pole of independent character and position is ever seen within the walls of the ancient Zamek Krolewski.*

Women of all possible ages, and every gradation of beauty and ugliness, have come together to-day. Some of the pretty ones have done their best to disfigure themselves by ignorant arrangements of color and material, and some of the ugly ones have almost succeeded in making themselves pretty by intelligent adaptation of the same. There were many handsomer women than Countess

* Royal residence or castle.

Biruta Massalowska in the room, yet none whose appearance evoked or rather compelled such general attention.

When Roman, standing in a doorway, first caught sight of her, she was leaning back in a low arm-chair, in an attitude of intense languor, indolently sipping a strawberry ice from off a little crystal plate. The hand, enclosed in a pale Swedish glove, appeared to find the silver spoon an intolerably heavy burden, and the head, pillowed against the crimson damask of the chair cushions, seemed to lack all strength to raise itself again from the recumbent position. Her dress was of yellowish silk and gauze, matching each other in hue, and almost matching her hair, indescribably draped and arranged in lissome folds, veiling, without concealing, the perfectly formed arms and the splendid neck and shoulders.

Half a dozen men of various ages were grouped about, each trying to obtain some transient mark of attention from the impassible goddess, though apparently with scanty success; for slowly as she ate her strawberry ice, and rarely as she raised the spoon to her lips, more rarely yet did the lips uncloze to answer one of the sprightly eager words or amorous sallies addressed to her. Of all these details, Roman, standing in his doorway, took note, and he noticed, besides, that one figure there was in especial, which rarely moved from her side—the figure of a stout, thickset man, with a flat, Kalmouck nose, and a short, apoplectic neck, wearing the dark-blue uniform of a Russian general officer.

“What a hideously ugly man, and what a languid, tire-some-looking woman!” had been his mental verdict on first catching sight of his *vis-à-vis*. “She has no life, no temperament. I wonder what the men can see in her!”

The music struck up, and dancing now began; but Countess Massalowska remained seated, deaf apparently to the entreaties of numerous suppliants. She had not danced since she was a widow, as every one knew, and there seemed to be no special reason for breaking through her habits to-day more than any other day; although to each individual man, as he proffered his request, there

seemed no doubt to be most excellent reasons for making an exception in his favor.

Unexpectedly, however, towards the close of the second valse, Countess Massalowska rose from her chair. Was it the music which had just changed to a more seductive strain? or was this last candidate for her favor in any way superior to his predecessors? or was it merely perhaps that she was beginning to weary of the unremitting conversations of her Kalmouck-faced admirer? Whether it were each or any of these motives that prompted her change of resolution was not very apparent. Certain it is only that she slowly rose to her feet, and, calmly handing the empty crystal plate to the discomfited general, suffered herself to be led off in triumph by the lucky petitioner, to the surprise and annoyance of a score of others who had previously sued in vain.

Roman, through his eye-glass, had lost no detail of this little episode, and his gaze still followed the couple as they were gradually drawn into the vortex of dancers. He first looked at the man who had been thus rewarded above his fellows, but failed to discover aught about his appearance that seemed to mark him out for special distinction. A young man of about four-and-twenty, whom Roman remembered having seen at the Sporting Club, neither handsome nor the reverse, neither intelligent nor stupid-looking; just a commonplace neutral young man like so many others, whose fate it is to be classed in a ball-room under the gregarious designation of dancers. He knew how to dance, and that was the principal, in fact the only, point worth considering about him. He was not wanted here either to be witty or to look beautiful, but simply and solely in order to use his legs. He had exceedingly good legs, and they acquitted themselves of their important functions in a manner that was highly creditable to their owner.

Countess Massalowska, leaning on his shoulder with a sort of weary grace, allowed herself at first to be passively carried along by this skilful dancing-machine, as though it were no business of hers at all; but by the time they

had once made the round of the large ball-room, and were passing by Roman for the second time, a perceptible change had come over her. Her figure was more erect, and into her face had come an expression which had not been there before. The wide-open eyes were shining as though in triumph, the pink-hued nostrils dilated as those of a race-horse nearing the goal, and from the half-parted lips the breath came quick and short. No longer limp and apathetic, she seemed now rather to be carrying along her dancer by the impetuous force of her own stronger nature.

"What an animated, impulsive creature!" Roman now thought as he watched her. "That woman would win any prize she had set her heart upon. I would back her against the whole world."

She had not danced for long, Count Massalowsk's tedious illness having kept her away from the ball-room of late years; and though she believed herself to be superior to all emotions of such purely frivolous nature, Biruta was still a young woman, whose youth would occasionally assert itself at unexpected moments.

Beneath an icy exterior, the blood coursed hot and quickly in her veins. To-day it had been roused anew by the almost forgotten sensation of dancing, by the suggestive strains of a seductive valse, by the breath of spring flowers perhaps, wafted in through the open window. She felt just then as though she could have gone on dancing forever. But only for a minute. In the next she had caught sight of a figure in the doorway watching her with close and, it seemed to her, critical attention. She had not come here to offer herself as a sight to amuse the curious, and, becoming suddenly aware that no one else was dancing, she made her partner conduct her back to her place.

Roman had met the gaze of her wide-open gray eyes, fixed full upon him with an expression of haughty surprise, and now he could see that she glanced again in his direction as she asked some question of her dancer. Shortly after, the young man with the good legs crossed the room and went up to Roman.

"Countess Massalowska desires me to present you to her," he said.

Slightly surprised, Roman followed his acquaintance, and was presented in due form.

Countess Massalowska did not speak at once, but after acknowledging the presentation by a very slight inclination of her regal head, she favored Roman with a long, attentive stare. When at last she spoke, her words were unexpected.

"You have a very fine profile," she said ; "I was admiring it in church the other day at Stara-Wola."

Roman was not easily embarrassed ; but it is hard on any man to be told in public that his profile is handsome. He colored perceptibly, and the slight laugh with which he endeavored to carry off his confusion was rather artificial.

The countess went on : "You would greatly oblige me by permitting me to make use of your profile in a picture that I am engaged upon. I am in want of a model for Paris."

The words were a petition, but the tone more resembled an order. Roman's first impulse had been to refuse, but then he reflected that it was incumbent on him to cultivate every opportunity of social intercourse that came in his way ; so he signified his readiness to become Countess Massalowska's Paris, and told himself that the interests of his diplomatic mission alone had influenced his resolution.

CHAPTER X.

PARIS.

"He was a very parfit gentil knight."

—CHAUCER.

COUNTESS MASSALOWSKA inhabited a furnished villa in the Alleja Ujazdowzna, the most fashionable suburb of Warsaw, for she had already begun to break up her establishment in the country, and only went out there occasionally, as necessity demanded, for superintending some arrangements connected with the division of the library and the packing of the family pictures.

The first sitting had been fixed for eleven o'clock on the day after the governor's *déjeuner*, and at eleven, accordingly, Roman, with military punctuality, rang at the villa gate.

A porter, resplendent in blue cloth and silver braiding, came to inquire his wishes.

The countess is still asleep," he answered, when Roman had explained his errand.

"And when will she be awake?"

The porter did not know. It was impossible to say. Sometimes his gracious mistress was pleased to sleep till three or four o'clock in the afternoon, sometimes she deigned to rise at daybreak.

"And she said nothing about me? She left no message that she expected any one at eleven?"

Countess Massalowska had left no message. Perhaps she had forgotten, or perhaps she had changed her mind, for she had ordered her riding-horse to be saddled at half-past ten. It was waiting there in the stables just now.

Apparently the servants were accustomed to such vagaries on the part of their mistress, for the porter's face expressed no surprise, nor did he attempt any apology.

Roman left his card, and walked away in some irritation. However little personal vanity a man may possess, or believe himself to be possessed of, and however clear-sighted and worldly-wise he may be, he is seldom able to realize such a curious circumstance as the fact of his existence having been forgotten by a woman.

"She must be a fool, after all," he mentally concluded; and he began to reflect that his first impulse had been the right one, and that it was unwise ever to have assented to the fantastic whim of an eccentric woman. But he was forewarned now, and would be wiser another time. In the future he would keep out of Countess Massalowska's way, he told himself.

It was several days before he saw her again; but one afternoon, as he was coming out of the Cukiernia Lurs, the fashionable confectioner, he recognized her carriage drawn up before the entrance. The carriage being open, he could not avoid a recognition, and was about to pass on with a formal bow, when her voice arrested him.

"Paris! my Paris! You are not going to run away from me. You promised to be my model."

"And I was ready to keep my promise, countess," returned Roman, rather stiffly. "I called at your house at the appointed hour last Wednesday."

"And I had forgotten all about it. Yes, I know. My memory is a very bad one. I only remembered when I saw your card, and then I was so sorry to have missed my model."

"The loss is not excessive," said Roman, still on his dignity.

"It is not irreparable, at all events," returned the countess, suavely. "There will be plenty more opportunities of taking your portrait."

"But, if your memory is so bad, countess, I cannot venture to expect you to remember another time any more than the first. You will naturally forget all about my insignificant person."

Countess Massalowska looked at him with the faintest suspicion of a smile.

"You are right," she said, calmly; "my memory is shockingly bad, and I might forget again, so the only way to avoid a repetition of such an accident is to carry you off on the spot. Get into the carriage; there will still be light enough to sketch in your features to-day."

Roman still hesitated; but the footman had already opened the carriage door, and the countess, with an imperious gesture, was pointing to the seat opposite her. She wore the same gold bonnet that resembled a crown, and more than ever looked like a queen, entitled to blind submission on the part of her subjects. He could not but obey; and the fleet bay horses bore him off swiftly in the direction of the villa.

Here he was bidden to wait in a little boudoir of Japanese character while Countess Massalowska changed her costume. Presently she returned, draped in a loose embroidered Holland wrapper, which she wore over her dress to protect it from the paint. The wide hanging sleeves showed her beautiful arms as plainly as had done the gauze dress at the governor's party last week. She was accompanied by a brown-bear cub about three months old, which, trotting by her side in self-contained fashion, was evidently accustomed to be regarded as a household member.

Roman followed Biruta into the atelier, which opened on to a balcony wreathed in creepers. Here were several low ottomans, covered with Oriental carpets, fur rugs on the ground, and ancient armor on the walls; a palm-tree in one corner, with a grinning skeleton as *vis-à-vis* to it in the other. There were, also, half-a-dozen easels standing about at various angles; on each easel a picture not more than half-finished. There was a Byzantine Madonna, without a nose; a couple of landscapes, of which but the skies had been laid on; a peasant girl, with one eye and a coral necklace; and a peasant man, with half a fur coat.

The picture on the last easel was a charcoal sketch intended to represent the Judgment of Paris. The three figures of Juno, Minerva, and Venus were already indicated on the canvas; while on the right side of the pict-

ure a headless shepherd, in hand the golden apple of discord, was standing under an olive-tree.

While indicating much talent, all these sketches had a raw and hurried appearance, as if—what was in fact the case—the artist had gone at each with feverish energy, discarding it abruptly whenever a newer fancy intervened.

Whether Paris would share the fate of its predecessor, or whether it would ever reach maturity, would depend upon how long the subject would continue to interest Countess Massalowska.

She took up a piece of charcoal, and rapidly began to bestow a head on the vacant torso.

She worked in silence at first, frowning a little whenever a stroke had not succeeded to her perfect satisfaction; the brittle charcoal often snapping asunder beneath her touch. She seemed no more to regard Roman than if he had been a wax-figure; but he grew uneasy under the influence of those large gray eyes, which he felt, but could not see.

It was tantalizing not to be able to look at her, for, turned in profile, her gaze was directed towards the balcony door.

For about twenty minutes Countess Massalowska worked on in silence; then she laid aside the charcoal with a sigh of relief.

"I think I have got the likeness. Come and see for yourself."

Roman's clean-cut profile lent itself readily to portraiture, and Countess Massalowska had certainly succeeded in hitting off the character of his delicately aquiline nose and long, curved brows and lashes.

"I tried to draw your face from memory the other day when I came back from Stara-Wola, but I could not get it right. It was such a pity I had no pencil with me that day in church," she went on, composedly, as though it were the most natural thing in the world to make studies of handsome young men in church. The words were flattering, certainly, but the matter-of-fact tone in which they were said removed all edge from the compliment.

"If I had only guessed your wishes, countess, I should have been delighted to place my pencil as well as my head at your disposal," said Roman, laughing.

"Really? I am sorry I did not think of asking you. It struck me at once, on coming into church, that here was the Paris I had been seeking for. I had already put away the picture in despair, and it never would have been finished but for that lucky chance."

"Then it was chance that brought you to Stara-Wola that day? You do not usually frequent our village church?"

"Chance and a broken bridge. You know our Polish proverb of the three most worthless things in the world? A German fast, a Russian devil, and a Polish bridge. My parish church is at Wodniki, when I am living in the country; but in that last flood, just before Holy Week, the bridge over the Skriva was carried away. That is why I came to Stara-Wola. Is that where you live?"

"My brother lives there, and I am on a visit to him," explained Roman.

"And how long do you remain in the country?"

"That depends. I do not yet know," said Roman, evasively. "I may remain on into the summer, if I find the life here very pleasant."

Biruta had now sat down on a low ottoman, and was pressing white oil-paint from a little zinc tube on to the palette. Presently she looked up at Roman and said, in answer to his last words,

"The life here? Do you mean life at Stara-Wola or at Warsaw?"

"Oh, both, turn about. I want to make acquaintance again with my country. I am ashamed to find what a stranger I have become."

"I am a stranger, too," said Biruta, thoughtfully, and, as it seemed to Roman, a little sadly. "I know next to nothing of Poland. I have never lived here before; not since I was quite a child."

"And you do not care to live here?" now ventured Roman, who had been watching her expression.

"No," she said, after a longish pause. "I do not think I could ever accustom myself to live in this country again."

"It must appear too dull, too narrow, to any one used to a more international sort of society. I have felt that myself."

"Too narrow. Yes. And also too sad."

"Too sad?"

"To a Pole; for though my late—uncle was in Russian service, I am a Pole, after all. I have only begun to realize this since I came back here last winter. Living abroad, one does not feel the misfortunes of Poland in the same way, but here at home they are constantly forcing themselves upon one's notice. What cannot be remedied had best be buried out of sight."

"Yet you frequent the Russian society, countess?"

"So do you, apparently?" with another sharp glance at Roman.

He laughed somewhat constrainedly.

"Oh, I am a mere bird of passage. What I do *n'a pas de consequence*. I am here on a holiday, and I take my pleasure where I find it."

"Ah!" said Biruta, in a tone that expressed some slight disappointment.

He felt that his admission had somewhat lowered him in Countess Massalowska's estimation, and hastened to add,

"Besides, the Russian society interests me—as a study."

"An uncongenial study, at best, as you will speedily find out. The old simile of the wolf and the dog never belies itself.* The dog can never be at ease in presence of the wolf, and only his fear teaches him to conceal his hatred."

"And does the wolf always hate the dog?" asked Roman, remembering the Kalmouck-faced general who had made himself so conspicuous by his attentions at the governor's party.

* The Polish and Russian character have been compared to those of dog and wolf—the two animals which hate each other most because of their similarity.

"Not always," replied Biruta, negligently, as with her palette-knife she began to mix a large layer of umber brown for the darker shades of hair and moustache. "Gogo!" she exclaimed, suddenly, apostrophizing the cub, who was curiously snuffling round the skeleton in the corner, with an evident view to ultimate dissection. "Come here at once."

The bear stopped sniffing, and, lying down submissively at Countess Massalowska's feet, was rewarded by the gift of a broken paint-brush to play with.

"You may sit down, if you are tired of standing," she resumed, speaking this time to Roman; "and will you turn your head a little more to the right, if you please."

She resumed her work in silence, apparently only intent on turning to best account the fast waning daylight, and Roman, having no excuse for pursuing the conversation so abruptly broken off, sat quite still, gazing out through the open balcony at the crimson sunset beyond, and wondering within himself whether Countess Massalowska would think worse or better of him if she were acquainted with his true errand in these parts.

After a while the bear cub uttered a low growl, and then the heavy tapestry curtain which screened the atelier from the boudoir was pushed aside. A harsh, rasping voice broke in upon the ears of artist and model—

"Your servant, divine countess! Is it permitted to penetrate into the temple of the muses?"

"You may come in, general, if you choose," said Biruta, without pausing in her work.

He came in, bringing along with him an overpowering perfume of violets and magnolia, exhaled from a monstrous nosegay carried in his hand.

"I ventured to look in, in order to see how the study of the old peasant is getting on," he said, after having pressed his lips, rather hard and needlessly long, as it seemed to Roman, on Biruta's disengaged left hand. "You know what interest I take in your work."

"Then pray give me the benefit of your criticism," re-

turned the countess. "Do you think I have succeeded in catching the likeness?"

The general, as flattered as he was short-sighted, proceeded to adjust his spectacles on his stumpy nose.

"Ah! what is this?" he said, in surprise, when he had examined the canvas. "This is not the same picture you were painting last time?"

"No," said Biruta, with a slight gesture indicating the hitherto unperceived figure near the window; "I have changed my model. Allow me to introduce him. Captain Starowolski, General Vassiljef."

"Ah!" repeated the general, after he had compared Roman's features with those of the discarded peasant, on the adjacent easel; "I always said that there was a deal of character about that old peasant's face. What a pity it is, countess, that you never finish your pictures!"

"I intend to finish this one," returned Biruta, quietly.

CHAPTER XI.

VENUS, JUNO, OR MINERVA?

"She is a woman, therefore may be woo'd ;
She is a woman, therefore may be won."

—*Titus Andronicus.*

AFTER this first day Roman often sat for his portrait to Countess Massalowska, who did not again forget the appointment. Some days the work was interrupted by fragmentary scraps of conversation, while on other days she hardly spoke at all. Sometimes again the brush would remain idle—or almost so.

Imperceptibly Roman began to succumb to this new influence that had unexpectedly sprung up in his life, and by the time he was roused to question himself as to where all this was leading, it was already too late.

The rousing came in the shape of a missive from the German War Office, which, enclosed in a letter of Felicyan's, he found lying on his table one evening early in June.

In order to avoid attracting the attention of the Warsaw post officials, he had caused all letters to be sent to Stara-Wola, whence they were here forwarded.

The present communication was in reply to some despatches he had sent about a fortnight previously. So far as it went, the information he had furnished was valuable, but he was reminded that it was as yet incomplete ; the principal object of his mission—namely, the respective tactical situations of Demblin, Modlin, and some other minor fortifications—not having yet been procured. If he did not see his way towards obtaining more extensive information, it would be wiser to return soon to Germany, he was told, as a prolonged stay in the country might awaken suspicion and compromise the government. Only

if he found himself on the track of any really valuable material was he given *carte blanche* to use his discretion in outstepping the leave which otherwise must expire on the 1st of July.

This letter—written in cipher—Roman perused very carefully twice over, then rose, and, lighting a taper, held the paper to the flame, watching it burn till nothing was left but dull gray flakes, which, stirred by a draught from the open window, floated lightly to the ground. Then, throwing himself into an arm-chair, he began to think.

He felt aware that he had not lately been pursuing the object of his mission as zealously as he had done at the outset. True, he had made notes and furnished reports of all the military statistics that had come within his range of knowledge. He had thoroughly reconnoitred Warsaw and its neighborhood, and furnished plans of its fortifications; he had paid frequent visits to the Powonski Field, the summer-encampment place of the troops, and had accurately gauged the value of the Russian horses and the efficiency of the Russian weapons. But, after all, this was mere child's play—good so far as it went, but presenting no difficulties which might not have been overcome by any officer of average intelligence. He had as yet done nothing calling for special distinction, nothing which could win for him those laurels of which he had been so sanguine in coming hither. Difficult? Why, of course his mission was a difficult one. But the greater the difficulty, the greater, too, the glory to be reaped; and then why had he volunteered for this mission at all, if he did not feel capable of accomplishing it? Had he even made the very first step towards solving the problem? had he visited either of the towns which had been pointed out to his notice? Roman had done none of these things as yet; and though he had amply exhausted the military resources of Warsaw, yet he lingered on here, and now for the first time he was compelled to ask himself why.

Because he had met a woman who had the gift of troubling and interesting him as never yet woman had done;

because he was like wax in her hands, and powerless to disobey, whenever she bade him come to her.

She had bade him come again to-morrow, and he would go, for the last time, he told himself. This delirious, delicious dream must be brought to a conclusion, the sooner the better. Love and ambition mate but ill together, he now recognized, and his honor required that he should accomplish the task he had undertaken. At risk of offending Countess Massalowska, at risk of losing her even (he had already reached this length in thinking of her), he must say farewell, he must leave Warsaw immediately.

Nothing that can be termed flirtation, no word of love, had passed between them as yet, and Roman believed that he had kept the secret of his feelings intact. As to Biruta—inscrutable as ever—it was impossible to guess at her thoughts. That air of calm proprietorship with which from the very first she had laid hold of Roman, was it merely the caprice of an eccentric woman accustomed to blind obedience? or was it something else?

This torturing question banished sleep that night; and Roman looked pale and haggard next morning, as he went forth to keep his last appointment with the countess.

His portrait, which by this time was nearly finished, had been far more carefully worked out than any of Countess Biruta's former pictures. Draped in a dark-green tunic, his handsome head bent slightly forward, as though eagerly scrutinizing the respective claims of the three women before him to the golden apple he held pressed against his breast, Roman Starowski was an ideal Paris, and Countess Massalowska's inspiration had been a happy one in assigning to him this part. The chief difficulty now would be to find three appropriate female models to represent Venus, Juno, and Minerva.

Discussing this question, the conversation to-day took a mythological turn.

"I am thinking of asking Olga Neridoff to pose for Venus," said Biruta, thoughtfully, as with a very fine brush she began putting in the high lights to the young shepherd's hair.

"Mademoiselle Neridoff!" said Roman, a little disdainfully.

"Why not? She has a classical low forehead and a Greek nose."

"But so insignificant! So wanting in expression!"

"I am sorry she does not meet with your approval, for you will be compelled to give her the golden apple."

"I would rather give it to Juno," said Roman, looking straight at the countess.

"And who is Juno, if you please?"

Roman did not answer in words, but his eyes replied for him.

"Oh!" said Biruta, answering him as though he had spoken his thought aloud. "You think that I am to be Juno? But you are quite mistaken. In the first place, my nose is not at all like Juno's nose, and then—there are other qualities which I lack. You see," she went on, as composedly as though she were discussing a mere technical point of art, "my idea in conceiving this picture was rather different from the usual mythological interpretation of the scene. I wish to throw the whole point into the expression of the three women. Venus is to be the beautiful woman—the maiden—who does not yet know love, Minerva is the strong, beautiful woman, who does not require love, and Juno the beautiful woman who has known love. I must get a married woman to sit for Juno—one who has had a *grande passion* (either for her husband or for some one else, it does not matter which). I have often remarked that a *grande passion* is the only thing for giving the proper curves to the mouth and the necessary depth to the eyes. I would not suit at all for Juno."

Roman felt that he was treading on rather dangerous ground, yet he could not forbear saying:

"I do not see your objection, countess. You have been married."

"Yes, I have been married—to my uncle," she returned, carelessly; and a moment later she added, half to herself, as it were, "It is not very—amusing, to marry an uncle."

Roman was beginning to lose sight of the prudent resolutions of overnight. If his life had depended on it, he could not have refrained from one more question :

"Then it is Minerva you aspire to be? the strong woman who does not require love?"

"We were only talking about the picture, I thought," said Biruta, with easy evasion; "and I told you already that I don't aspire to any place in it at all—neither Juno nor Minerva. But what is the matter with your eyes?" she broke off, suddenly. "There are dark streaks under them that were not there last time. I have used up a whole brushful of indigo, trying to get the shadow right."

"I slept badly last night," returned Roman, rather shortly.

She gave him a long, earnest look, but did not take any further notice of the statement.

"Where is General Vassiljef—he has not been here lately?" inquired Roman, after a while.

"You miss him? He was summoned to St. Petersburg last week by the Minister of War, but he will soon be back again. You will have the pleasure of seeing him in about ten days."

"In ten days," said Roman, speaking very slowly, "I shall probably be gone."

"What do you mean?" said Biruta, quickly.

"That I cannot remain on here indefinitely; there is no reason for staying."

"No reason?"

"None," said Roman, trying to speak calmly. "I shall be obliged to go."

"To go where? Back to Stara-Wola?"

"Yes, to Stara-Wola; and also I am going to travel about the country. I want to see something of the land."

"But I thought you were free? You only came here on a holiday, you said?"

"And that is why I am using my freedom," he returned, with a rather constrained laugh.

"You are using your freedom in order to go away—from—from Warsaw!"

"I must," he replied, very low.

"But you promised to sit for the picture of Paris till it was finished?"

"And I have kept my promise, countess. You said yourself just now that the figure was almost complete."

Biruta, instead of answering, laid down her brush and palette, and began fumbling in her pocket. She drew out a cambric pocket-handkerchief elegantly embroidered with her monogram and edged with delicate, filmy lace; an ethereal, idealized handkerchief, intended for show only, not at all for hard work—certainly not for such work as it was now put to, as, rolling up the cambric into a round, hard ball, Countess Massalowska proceeded deliberately with it to obliterate the almost completed figure of Paris on the canvas. A minute later, and there remained nothing more of the interesting young shepherd but a confused mass of brown and gray, while the snowy-lace handkerchief, stained and unrecognizable, had assumed the aspect of a rotten apple.

She flung it from her into a corner, where it was joyfully seized upon by Gogo, and turned towards Roman with a strange expression in her eyes—an expression which he could not read at all. Her breath was coming short and fast, as though with the exertion of her action.

"There now," she panted. "You cannot say that the figure is complete. I shall have to begin it over again!"

"What do you mean?" asked Roman, who had watched her proceedings with stupefaction, his brain all in a whirl.

She came close up to him—so close that he could feel her breath against his cheek.

"It means," she said, in a whisper almost inaudible—"it means that I am neither Juno, the woman who has known love, nor Minerva who can do without it. It means that you cannot, must not, go away."

In the next instant he was at her feet. He had taken possession of her unresisting hands, and was pressing them to his heart, to his lips. . . .

For some minutes she suffered his caresses in silence, then, disengaging both hands, she clasped them round his

neck with an air of taking possession of something rightfully her own, while, bending down, she lightly touched his forehead with her lips. There was something royal in her gesture; just so might a queen have conferred knighthood on a kneeling squire at her feet. What would have appeared bold and unseemly in any other woman who offers herself to a man was in her perfectly natural and dignified. Recognizing his love, she had merely stretched out her hand to take what he dared not offer.

"Roman! My Roman!" she now murmured into his ear. • "Have I conquered you at last? You are mine—my very own, to hold and to keep!"

These words restored him to the reality of his position. He started to his feet and drew back a step from her.

"What is it? You do not love me as I love you?"

"I love you, Biruta, as I have never loved before—but—but—I am not free."

"You are bound to some other woman," she said, turning rather pale.

"I am bound—but not to a woman, thank God!"

"Thank God!" she echoed, while her color began to flow back again. "Then it can be nothing serious."

"It is serious all the same," said Roman, very gravely.

"Tell me what it is."

He hesitated, for the secret was not his own, and a month ago he would have scoffed the bare idea of taking a woman into his confidence. But just at this moment he was not able to think very clearly. How could he have done so with Biruta's voice echoing in his ear? and Biruta's kiss still trembling on his forehead? and when once more she had said "Tell me" with those large gray eyes fixed full upon his, he could not but obey. After all, had she not a right to his confidence now? and was not the happiness of his life dependent on the manner in which she would receive his confession?

They sat down together on a low ottoman near the window, and Roman told his tale of how he had been sent hither to report upon Russia's defences against Germany. He spoke in a low, choking voice, every word being brought

out with a visible effort. Fearful of reading condemnation in Biruta's eyes, he had purposely averted his own, and sat gazing out of the window at the creepers on the balcony, wondering how long his suspense would last.

It was of short duration, for almost before he had finished speaking Biruta had seized his hand in both of hers.

"Will you take me for your ally, Roman, as well as for your wife?" she cried, impetuously. A woman always makes a better spy than a man, and I have no reason to love the Russians any more than yourself; they tried to send my father to Siberia, and would have made me a beggar. It shall go hard if between us we do not contrive to outwit them!"

The next two hours passed in a blissful trance, though in the corner opposite the bleached skeleton, with its sardonic grin, seemed to have been put there expressly to mock the spectacle of youth and happiness.

CHAPTER XII.

SCHEMING.

"When I rush on, sure none will dare to stay ;
'Tis love commands, and glory leads the way."

—LEE.

ROMAN, at Biruta's desire, left Warsaw early in June, for after that one burst of passion, in which with the force of a whirlwind she had taken possession of her lover, the woman had displayed far more self-restraint than the man. She had taken his political mission fully more seriously to heart than he himself had done a few weeks ago, and for the present had concentrated all her mental energies upon the solution of this problem. There was not a trace remaining of the languid *ennuyée* woman, who had often seemed devoid of the physical strength required for walking through the figures of a quadrille, or to lack sufficient intellect for the most ordinary conversational purposes. She was like a soulless being into whom a spirit had been breathed ; a candle to whose wick a flame has been applied. What she had wanted before was an object in life, and this she had now found—a double object, love and ambition. But ambition must have its rights before love could be indulged in, and Roman was amazed at the almost masculine grasp of intellect with which she discussed this aspect of their position.

"Time enough to be happy by-and-by," she had answered, when Roman had vainly pleaded to be allowed to stay a few more days beside her. "Love will keep, but your mission will not. I shall manage much better without you. Your presence here just now would do far more harm than good."

"But how will you set about it? What can a woman do?" asked Roman, looking at her with admiration, slightly tinged with awe.

"More than a man," she returned with one of her enigmatical smiles. "In the first place, General Vassiljef will return in a day or two. He is sure to come and see me at once, for he is bringing back the blue necklace I sent to be repaired at St. Petersburg. I have no confidence in the Warsaw jewellers."

"And what good will that do?"

"All the good in the world perhaps. He is considered a great authority on the subject of fortifications—and then he is in love with me," completed Biruta, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"But you cannot, you must not, suffer his attentions any longer, now that you belong to me."

"On the contrary, not only will I suffer, but I shall encourage them," said Biruta, firmly. "It is our best chance of success."

Roman's well-marked eyebrows contracted visibly as he said:

"Then what is your plan? What do you mean to do? I insist upon knowing. I have a right to be told."

"Of course I must be guided by circumstances, and it is impossible to trace out the programme exactly beforehand; but from what I know of General Vassiljef, it will not, I think, be difficult to make him tell me whatever I choose."

"You believe in hypnotism?" said Roman, with a short but rather cheerless laugh.

"Not perhaps in a general way; but I do believe in the almost unlimited power of certain individuals over others."

"And so General Vassiljef is, you consider, a likely subject for hypnotism?"

"A very likely subject, provided I am the hypnotizer. Perhaps it is not every one I can influence in that way; but of Vassiljef and of—some others I feel certain. With a little management I could bring him to disclose all he knows."

"What do you call management?" pursued Roman, still far from satisfied. "What are you proposing to do?"

"Oh, nothing very dreadful," said Biruta with a slight

laugh, which somehow jarred upon his ear. "I need only let him come here pretty often, and suffer him to kiss my hand occasionally. He admires my hands very much," she went on, holding the pink, transparent nails up to the light; "and my shoulders still more."

Roman seized her in his arms with violence. "Biruta!" he cried, "I cannot endure this. I was wrong ever to have told you my secret—ever to have mixed you up in this degrading business. Yes, Felicyan was right; it is degrading to be a spy."

"You should have thought of that before. It is too late now to turn back."

"It is not too late," he said, excitedly. "I shall resign my mission. I shall write to the War Office this very day to say that I am not able to accomplish it. Some one else may do so in my place—I care not."

"And what then?" inquired Biruta coldly, almost hardly, as she drew back from his embrace. "Do you think I shall ever be the wife of a man who was faint-hearted enough to throw up the game at the first obstacle? A good racehorse never stops till it has reached the goal. If you give up your mission you give me up as well."

As might have been foreseen, Roman was vanquished, and though still moody and dissatisfied, he blindly agreed to everything proposed by Biruta, who unfolded her plans with the clearness and precision of a great commander disposing his forces for combat. She would hasten to complete the arrangements for the sale of her property in Russia, so as to be free for all emergencies, as, in the contingency of her part in the matter ever coming to light, the estates must inevitably be again confiscated. It was therefore expedient to have her fortune transferred from Russia with the least possible delay. English consols would be the safest investment for the present, she thought.

Most people had left Warsaw by this time, for the warm weather had already set in, but her remaining on here would not be likely to arouse suspicion, since it was generally understood that she had come hither on family business, and could not leave the country till the arrange-

ments were wound up. She made Roman give her a minute account of the details of his mission, and made notes of the principal points still remaining to be ascertained, which, in the form of leading questions, were to be applied to General Vassiljef as opportunity occurred. Meanwhile Roman himself was to visit the fortresses of Modlin and Demblin, and thence, without returning to Warsaw, proceed straight to Stara-Wola, and there await the result. His presence here would spoil everything, for it was of the first importance that the link between them should not be guessed at. If she failed with Vassiljef, then it would be time enough to think of some other plan.

"But I shall die of suspense and—and of jealousy!" he exclaimed.

"Jealousy! Of that old gorilla! Roman, I am ashamed of you. You should never have professed to love me if you can be so weak, so childish as to distrust me."

"Forgive me," he said humbly, taking hold of her hand and laying it upon his burning forehead. "But it makes me so wretched to go away; and I am so anxious, so doubtful about the future. Sometimes I feel as if I had got into a labyrinth, and could not find my way out again."

"I shall be your guide," said Biruta, confidently. "Is not my own happiness at stake just as much as yours?" she went on more softly. "And do you think I would send you from me without necessity?"

CHAPTER XIII.

BLACK CHERRIES.

"He saw her charming, but he saw not half
The charm."

—THOMSON.

So Roman, after travelling about the country for some ten days, and visiting various fortified towns where he contrived to pick up a good deal of miscellaneous information, returned to Stara-Wola, being warmly received by Felicyan and his wife—by Luba, too, who came out to greet him with a pink rose in her hair, and a yet brighter color on her cheek.

But the days passed very slowly for Roman. June is a busy month in the country, and Felicyan, constantly absent in the fields, his thoughts engrossed by the state of the wheat crop, had little time to devote to his brother. Hala, too, had her hands full, preserving cherries and strawberries for winter use, and was oftener in the kitchen than in the drawing-room at this period. Only Luba was always at leisure, always lively and good-humored, whenever Roman was inclined to walk or talk with her, and imperceptibly he acquired the habit of turning to her for companionship—for every man, even a man in love with another woman, must have companionship of some kind.

The Mazur lessons were not resumed, however, for the weather had now grown very warm, and flies were getting numerous, to the great satisfaction of old Nicorowics, who wandered from room to room, daily annihilating many scores of victims with the weapon which he never laid aside save to eat or to sleep. The bathing-hut down yonder in the creek had already been unlocked and put into order for summer use. It lay so conveniently near the house that Roman used to stroll down to the river every

morning for the purpose of taking a plunge before breakfast.

Returning to the house after his morning bath, one brilliant day in June, he was much disappointed to find that Felicyan had been summoned off to a distant neighbor by a message regarding the sale of a winnowing-machine. He would not return before next evening.

"And he had promised to ride with me to-day," said Roman, rather aggrieved. "He was to have shown me a short cut to the place where the pontoon-bridge is projected across the Vistula."

Hala, attired in a coarse linen apron, was seated on a bench in the veranda, beside her a large basket of cherries, which, in a rapid and business-like fashion, she was divesting of their stalks. Luba on a large wooden stool was similarly employed, but she worked more indolently, and, judging by the evidence of numerous cherry-stones that strewed the veranda, a not inconsiderable portion of the fruit had been turned aside from its original destination.

"I am sorry," said Hala, pausing in her occupation, "but you see, Felicyan said that the matter about the winnowing-machine was pressing. Luba, don't eat so many cherries," she put in parenthetically; "you will quite spoil your appetite for breakfast."

Luba only replied by putting another cherry into her mouth, and smiling up at Roman as he stood beside them. When she smiled, her dark eyes lighted up in an unexpected way, making her almost beautiful. In repose the eyes were somewhat apt to look drowsy and expressionless, not unlike the black cherries she was picking just now.

"Felicyan will go with you some other day," resumed Hala, turning to her brother-in-law.

"Some other day!" echoed Roman, rather despondently. "Who knows how long I may be remaining here?"

Luba looked quickly up, and as quickly looked down again.

"Can you not go by yourself?" asked Hala.

"No," he replied, with a touch of that petulance which of late had become more frequent with him; "I could not find the place alone. I am not yet sufficiently at home in your woods to know my way about."

Of course he could not explain to his sister-in-law that he did not care to be seen riding alone about the country, as, being a stranger in these parts, his appearance might attract attention and excite suspicion; whereas the presence of Felicyan, well known by sight as a harmless agriculturist, would be a safeguard.

"But why are you so anxious just to see this place?" said Madame Starowska, her passing curiosity aroused by Roman's manner. "There is nothing particularly worth seeing about it that I know of. It is just like any other part of the river."

"No, nothing particular, I dare say," he returned, somewhat confusedly. "It is only a whim, a fancy of mine; and as there is not much to be done here in the way of amusement, I thought I might as well see the place. I always like to have an object for my rides; but, of course, as Felicyan is not here, it must be given up for to-day."

Luba, who had been gazing up at Roman with an expression of deepest compassion for his evident disappointment, now put up a well-formed brown hand, its fingers tipped rosy by cherry-juice, and gave a little tug to Hala's linen apron.

"What is it, Luba?" asked Madame Starowska.

Luba drew down her sister's head and whispered something into her ear.

Hala first shook her head rather undecidedly, then quite as undecidedly she smiled. After a little hesitation she said, aloud, "Luba says that she can show you the way; she knows all the forest paths about here."

"That is, if you don't mind taking me," now put in Luba, seeing that Roman did not answer at once.

"Mind! Oh, of course not!" exclaimed Roman, as if awakening from a dream. "Why should I? In fact, it will be ever so much—better than going with Felicyan. It will, indeed." He had been on the point of saying

"ever so much safer," for the thought shot through his mind that for the object he had in view a young lady companion would be the very best possible recipe for disarming suspicion. Should any one meet them—any Russian official, for instance—Roman would be taken for a harmless country gentleman, taking a ride with his sister or his sweetheart; nothing could be neater or more appropriate.

Luba colored with pleasure when she heard his exclamation.

"I did not know that you could ride," Roman continued.

"Oh, yes, I am very fond of it, but Felicyan has hardly ever time to ride with me. How delightful it will be to have a good gallop again through those glades in the forest!"

"But you must have a leading-rein," said Hala, who, now that she had given her consent to the arrangement, began to doubt the wisdom of the plan. "Luba is very brave, foolhardy in fact, but she has not been on horseback for more than a year, and Hetman, the gray cob, is not near as quiet as the old chestnut mare which Felicyan sold in autumn; and, Roman, you must promise to take great care of her—indeed you must."

"Oh, every care," he returned, lightly. "Do you not know that a cavalry officer is capable of managing a whole regiment of young ladies. But how about the saddle?" he went on, turning to Luba. "Have you got a good side-saddle?"

There was a side-saddle—an excellent one, as Luba eagerly explained.

"Of what maker?" inquired the young officer, with the air of a connoisseur; "Vienna or English? With the right pommel cut away, as is now the fashion? And is there a safety stirrup?"

Luba knew nothing about the maker, and had never even heard the name of a safety stirrup before; but she was sure that the saddle was a good one. "You had better come and see it for yourself," she answered in conclusion.

There proved to be some difficulty, however, in finding this excellent saddle, for no one seemed to know where it had been put away. At last little Zosia recollected having seen it in the barn some weeks ago, huddled aside between empty packing-cases and discarded hen-coops. Kostus, who had stolen into the barn in quest of mischief presumably, had made a precipitate exit, saying that there was a large black bull lying down in a dark corner.

"And it was only Aunt Luba's saddle, and the bull's horns were the pommels," finished Zosia in a patronizing tone. "Kostus is a very stupid little boy, to be afraid of a saddle."

The quondam bull, forthwith dragged out to the light of day, proved to be in sorry condition. Wreathed with cobwebs, smothered in dust, the leather dry and cracked, the padding torn and moth-eaten, the saddle which Luba had so confidently asserted to be in excellent condition presented a doleful appearance.

"There is nothing wrong about it, is there?" she inquired naively, as Roman did not speak.

"Wrong?" he echoed, superciliously, having put up his eyeglass to examine the wreck. "Why, there is nothing right about it from beginning to end. It's wrong altogether."

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed, in a tone of mingled disappointment and surprise; "I always thought that it was such a good saddle."

"Was?" he repeated. "Yes, it may have been a good saddle once upon a time, a score of years ago. Why, it must be twenty years old at least."

"Thirty. It belonged to your mother, Felicyan told me."

"My mother's old saddle! No wonder it is rather out of date;" and Roman, with the shining tip of his pointed boot, lightly touched the unwieldy construction, adorned by two monstrous horn-like pommels, with a gesture half tender, half contemptuous.

"Then can we not ride to-day?" asked Luba, who had anxiously been scanning his face. She tried to speak

steadily, but a quiver in the voice and a suspicious moisture in the eye betrayed how closely her heart was set on the expedition.

Roman, good-natured at core, perceived her distress, and, besides, he was really anxious himself for the ride. Any day, any hour, might bring a letter from Biruta summoning him to Warsaw, and he might not again have the opportunity of visiting the site of the proposed pontoon-bridge over the Vistula. It was an important military point, which from the first he had intended to reconnoitre, as, in the contingency of a campaign, it was imperative to ascertain and verify the sites elected for the erection of pontoon-bridges, by means of which the enemy might shift his forces indiscriminately to either bank of the river. Roman would long since have visited this place, only that Felicyan had not yet found time to guide him to the spot, for it was a long ride, involving an absence of five or six hours from the farm.

"Well, perhaps we need not give up the expedition. I should be as much disappointed as yourself if we had to do so. By having the leather thoroughly soaped and greased, and putting an extra thick rug beneath it, we may contrive to make the poor old saddle do duty once more."

Luba's smile on hearing this was like sunshine breaking forth after a shower; unfortunately it was lost upon Roman, who had already turned away to give the necessary directions respecting the saddle.

CHAPTER XIV.

SHADY.

" . . . The Heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here."

—SHAKESPEARE.

AFTER an early dinner partaken of in haste, Luba made her appearance, attired in a wide-flowing Amazon skirt which bore little resemblance to the correct tight habits of Roman's Berlin acquaintances; a wide-flapping Leghorn straw hat, a striped pink linen bodice, and a broad Russia-leather belt, into which she had stuck a bunch of speckled carnations, completed this terribly unfashionable attire, yet not devoid of a certain rustic charm of its own, and looking, like Luba herself, sweet, fresh, and country-like, and perfectly in keeping with her rural surroundings.

So at least thought Hala, and so, too, would have thought any country-bred man whose taste had not been cultivated, or vitiated, by contact with the fashionable world. But Roman was not a country-bred man, and it is more than questionable whether, even had he not seen and loved Birutā, he would ever have been seriously attracted by the rustic prettiness and naive coquetry of Luba Nicorowicz. There are people who cannot appreciate the perfume of new-mown hay, unless it is sold by Atkinson at half a crown a bottle; and a humble field-flower rarely finds favor in eyes that have acquired a taste for exotic plants.

"Permit me," said Roman, coming round to the side of Luba's horse, and offering his clasped hands for her to mount from.

Luba had been accustomed to mount from a kitchen-chair, and greatly preferred this mode of ascension, but not liking to confess her inexperience, she accepted his assistance with heightened color and a quick-beating heart.

The first attempt was a dead failure, for, jumping short of the saddle, she fell back almost into his arms, which scarcely tended to restore her composure ; but after a few more trials she was safely landed at last, and glad to hide her confusion by bending low over the bridle while she pretended to arrange it. A leading-rein was attached to the gray cob's head-piece, and then, Roman having mounted his own steed, the two set forth, Luba little dreaming that she was bound on a secret military reconnoissance in the service of the German government.

"Only take good care of her!" called out Hala after the equestrians.

Roman merely bowed in reply, scarcely turning round in the saddle, but Luba waved her hand joyfully, and showed a face so radiant with delighted anticipation that Hala's own countenance caught the reflection of her sister's mood, and smilingly she stood watching them disappear down the short avenue and out on to the road beyond.

Everything seemed to be progressing favorably, she thought, when after a while she turned to go back to her jam-pots in the kitchen. Roman was evidently beginning to get attached to Luba, there could be no doubt of that ; why else should he have been so anxious to take this long ride with her just to-day ? If he had been indifferent to her, it would have been easy for him to put off the expedition till Felicyan's return. As for Luba, there could be no doubt of her feelings. Her tell-tale face would have betrayed her secret to eyes much less penetrating than those of a sister. Two brothers marrying two sisters—what a delightfully convenient arrangement, thought Hala, as she weighed out the sugar that was to be used for making the cherry-jam. It was a pity, though, that Roman was an officer ; she did not feel sure that Luba would be happy living in a German town. But his career had many compensating advantages, no doubt. He would be major some day, perhaps even colonel, and Luba, little Luba, would be a colonel's wife. People would say *Madame la Colonelle* to her!—and just at this juncture in her day-dream Hala awoke to the fact that the caldron of

syrup on the fire had boiled over, and was discharging its contents in a crimson cataract on the brick-laid kitchen-floor.

Meanwhile the riders had reached the forest, and struck into one of the numerous bridle-paths by which it was intersected. Sometimes the way was so narrow that the two horses had barely space to walk side by side; sometimes again they emerged on to broad green glades, where a luxurious canter could be indulged in.

Roman was rather silent, and made no attempt to keep up consecutive conversation. Perhaps it was the heat which made him disinclined to talk, thought Luba. It certainly was very hot in the forest at this hour. Hetman, the gray cob, seemed to feel it too, for he shook his head repeatedly, and gave other signs of being in bodily discomfort.

"It must be the flies that are making him restless," exclaimed Luba at last. "See, there are a whole cluster on the poor thing's neck. If only I had a branch for brushing them away."

"I shall get you one directly," he replied, reining up his horse under a slender birch-tree, whose silvery stem showed white amid the surrounding blackness of the pines. "Here is a branch that will just suit your purpose," and with his pocket-knife he proceeded swiftly and deftly to divest the twig of its superfluous foliage, leaving only a thick green tassel at the end.

They were now in the very heart of the forest, on a path so little frequented that the stately firs on either side had had leisure to stretch forth their arms towards each other, frequently meeting in a prickly embrace. Roman had repeatedly been forced to bend aside the boughs in order to make room for himself and his companion to pass. Just here where they stood, a dense green barrier closed in all around them, just as if the venerable trees had been so many benevolent matchmakers, who with loving conspiracy were endeavoring to keep here imprisoned together two young people so evidently made for each other.

A deep summer stillness pervaded the atmosphere—that summer stillness which, unlike the cold silence of winter, is penetrated throughout with the warm pulsations of animal and vegetable life ; with hundred-fold subdued sounds and echoes, more felt than heard. There was a slight hum of insects in the air, too faint to be called buzzing ; the sound of a woodpecker's bill against a hollow stem, too distant to be called tapping ; the liquid murmur of a woodland spring, too low to be called gurgling ; an occasional quiver among the birch-leaves, too ethereal to be called rustling ; yet each and all together bearing evidence that the forest was alive with myriads of unseen creatures and covert existences.

Presently a red-coated squirrel came leaping by through the pine-branches overhead, closely followed by its mate in amorous pursuit—their short staccato cries of mingled love and defiance the only positive sound in the animated silence.

"How beautiful it is here in the forest !" said Luba, with a happy little sigh, as she took the twig from Roman's hand.

"Yes, beautiful," he said, indifferently, and looking at his watch, "but we must try and get out of it as fast as we can ; there is no time to be lost if we are to get back to Stara-Wola before nightfall."

Luba sighed again, not so happily this time, and passively followed Roman as he bent aside the branches in order to release her from this sylvan prison. She did not speak again till they had reached a broad sandy cart-track, where Roman proposed to strike into a brisk trot by way of making up for lost time.

"I think I might now dispense with the leading-rein," said Luba, suddenly, and with a shade of childish petulance. "It is so tiresome to be guided about like a baby in leading-strings. I am perfectly well able to take care of myself."

"Certainly, if you prefer it," and he stooped down readily to detach the leather strap from Hetman's bridle.

Luba most unaccountably looked scarcely pleased at

this ready acquiescence to her wishes ; she had expected that he would demur, would claim as his right perhaps the privilege of taking care of her, and there may have been some confused unacknowledged thought in her mind that it would be very sweet to yield to his authority. Also, though she was most assiduous in brushing off the flies, Hetman seemed to derive no special benefit from the proceeding, but started and shied so frequently that Luba heartily regretted the loss of the leading-rein ; but not for worlds would she have confessed her tremors after having so proudly asserted her independence.

CHAPTER XV.

A PICTURE.

"Love built a stately house where fortune came,
And spinning fancies, she was heard to say
That her fine cobwebs did support the frame."

—GEORGE HERBERT.

It was past five o'clock when, emerging from the shade of pines and birches, they reached the river-bank at one of the spots selected for the erection of a pontoon-bridge. The site was well chosen, as Roman with the eye of an expert at once recognized, for whereas to the right and the left the ground for a considerable distance was swampy and insecure, here only for a stretch of scarce a hundred yards there was a firm, shingly beach, reaching back almost to the forest-edge. In coming along he had already noted how the wood had been hewn out at various places, forming clearances sufficient for the passage of artillery and the concentration of considerable bodies of soldiers. Thanks to these arrangements, it would be easy for an army of ten thousand men to approach unperceived under cover of the forest and be across the Vistula within two hours. On the other hand, however, the right bank of the river was considerably higher than the left one at this place, and from the eminence half a dozen cannons would be able to command the bridge and prevent the troops from landing.

Four stout wooden posts, driven into the ground on either shore, indicated the exact site of the proposed bridge. Roman, dismounting, tied his horse to one of these; then he drew out a map, and began to verify the spot, making slight, almost imperceptible pencil-marks as he did so.

Luba had taken off her hat, and was fanning herself with it. She was flushed with the long ride in the heat,

and her hair, deranged by frequent scrambling through the fir-branches, was rough and untidy. One long plait had slipped down, and was straying over her shoulder.

"What are you doing?" she presently inquired of Roman, who was unpacking the contents of a leather case he had attached to his saddle before starting. "What is in that box?"

"It is a photographic apparatus."

"And you really can photograph! How clever you must be!" and she looked at him with boundless admiration in her eyes. "But what do you want to photograph here? It is not at all a pretty place; I can show you far nicer views much nearer home."

It now for the first time occurred to Roman that Luba's curiosity might be inconvenient, and that at any price her suspicions must be disarmed. He had not thought of this before; indeed, he had not distinctly intended to make use of the apparatus to-day, and only on reaching the spot had he recognized its tactical importance, and thought how valuable such a photographic reproduction of the place might become. He was not long at a loss for an excuse; his easy *savoir faire* suggested a pretext which he felt sure must divest his proceeding of any momentous signification in Luba's eyes.

"I want to take your photograph," he said, looking across at her as she sat motionless on the gray cob. He had also had time to consider that a horse and rider would not much disfigure his picture. It would be easy to efface them from the plate before the views were printed off.

"My photograph!"

"Yes, why not? You do not mind, surely?" and Roman, whose knowledge of women was considerable, reflected that if she did object, she must be a very peculiar young lady indeed. He had never yet come across a woman who was not overjoyed at the idea of sitting for her portrait.

"No-o," said Luba; "of course I do not mind. I have only once been photographed before, and it did not suc-

ceed very well. My face came out exactly like the reflection in the fat looking-glass, and my feet were as large as Felicyan's almost. But had you not better put it off for another time? If I had known that you were going to make a picture of me, I should have put on my new bodice; only Hala thought it was a pity to run the risk of soiling it in the forest. My blue bodice is ever so much prettier than this one," she finished with half a sigh.

"Oh, your dress is all right," said Roman, without looking at her, for he was busy putting up the folding stand on which the apparatus was to rest.

"And my hair," went on Luba, much distressed, "it is all in disorder, I feel. How I wish I had a mirror! I am sure I must be looking a perfect fright. Give me at least time to arrange it." And hanging her hat on the right-hand pommel, she dropped the reins and began hastily twisting up the vagabond plait.

"No, no!" exclaimed Roman, who was growing impatient, anxious to make use of the favorable conditions of light and shade, as well as of the perfect solitude that reigned around them, for carrying out his purpose. There was not a creature to be seen on land or river, but even a peasant passing by might be the means of attracting inconvenient attention to his proceedings. "Do not touch your hair, I implore you, Mademoiselle Luba. I want to take you just as you are at this moment; you have no idea how nice, how pretty you look!"

The bright blush which mantled Luba's cheek made her look prettier still, and she attempted no further expostulation.

"Am I sitting straight?" she anxiously inquired, when he had completed his arrangements.

"Yes, I think so," he returned, looking at her with critical attention, considering whether she was not concealing any important feature in the landscape. "But will you move your horse a little more to the left, please—so, that will do; now do not move till I give you leave."

Luba, sitting motionless and hardly daring to breathe for fear of spoiling the picture, fixed her eyes on a little

sandbank that lay some fifty yards distant up the river. Gilt by the rays of the sun, now sinking low, it looked to her like a golden islet cast in the azure flood that washed it on either side ; and, her mind all full of confused happy thoughts, she was dreaming perhaps of a blissful future as bright as yonder golden isle—perchance of a love as deep as the river alongside ; of a life that should flow as smoothly and harmoniously as the mighty current itself. Foolish, delusive dreams ! yet such as surely every girl has dreamed on some midsummer day, only to wake up anon and discover that the sun has gone from the landscape, and that gold and azure have been exchanged for the sad-tinted drabs and grays which color most of our days.

Even now, as Luba watched, during the eighty seconds or so that the process lasted, she became aware of a cloudy appearance up the river, which blurred and confused the view as with an approaching fog.

Roman had scarcely shut up the machine when a steamboat came in view, rounding an adjacent promontory.

"How lucky it is that I had already finished !" he exclaimed, as, catching sight of the approaching vessel, he hastily began taking down the apparatus and restoring it to the little case in which it had been packed.

As the steamboat came opposite to where they stood, it slackened pace, for there were some awkward shallows just here to be passed, and began letting off the steam with an ear-rending screech.

Roman's horse plunged violently, but, securely tied up to the wooden post, was unable to escape. Luba, who had dropped the reins in order to plait up her hair, was taken completely by surprise when the gray cob, veering sharply round, galloped off in the direction of the forest.

Roman, watching the steamer, was roused by her cry for help, and, inexpressibly horrified, started off in pursuit. It was some minutes before he found them. Luba, sitting at the foot of a tree, was crying, and holding up one hand to her forehead as though in pain. A few paces off, the gray cob, divested of its saddle, was grazing plac-

idly. Dashing under a low overhanging branch the blow had unseated her, and in the fall some rotten old strap had given way, causing rider and saddle to roll together to the ground. No serious injury had been sustained, as Roman recognized with intense relief, but he shuddered at the thought of what might have been. How could he ever again have shown his face at Stara-Wola if this accident had turned out differently? If Luba had been crippled—or dead! God forbid that he should ever be the means of bringing sorrow on his brother's family! And it would have been his fault, all his own fault, if such had happened; for, absorbed in pursuit of his own private ends, he had lost sight of Hala's injunctions about taking care of her sister. Had he not been just using the poor, unsuspecting girl as a straw figure—a mere decoy-duck—to conceal the real object of his manipulations? And but for the photograph this accident would never have occurred.

"Oh, I am a brute, a monster, not to have taken better care of you!" he cried, impetuously, as he threw himself on the ground beside her. "Forgive me, Luba!—oh, say you will forgive me!"

Luba began to dry her eyes, and tried to smile at him; but her lips quivered, and she was still very pale with the fright and the shock sustained.

Roman took hold of her hand and pressed it to his lips.

"Are you much hurt? I shall never forgive myself if you are."

"It is not very bad," Luba managed to stammer, fully more confused by Roman's warmth of manner than by the blow on her head; "only my forehead smarts a little where the branch hit it in falling."

"I shall wet my handkerchief in the river and tie it round your head; that will keep the place from swelling up."

"And oh! could you get me some water to drink?" she murmured, in a voice that was still rather faint.

Roman was gone like a flash of lightning, and soon returned, leading his horse, and bearing a pocket-flask full

of water. With the tender care of an affectionate brother, he bathed and bound up her wounded forehead; and how was Luba to know that his attentions were merely brotherly?

After resting for some twenty minutes she felt quite revived, and declared herself able to proceed homewards. But it proved no such easy matter to re-saddle the gray cob; the piece of leather that had given way had to be replaced by a strap from the case of the photographic apparatus. Hetman, too, appeared to have been wounded as well as Luba, for there was a place rubbed sore on its back, and already the flies were beginning to settle on the congealed blood, and further to irritate the poor animal. A closer investigation of the inside of the saddle showed this to have been caused by a long protruding nail, which, during the ride, had been slowly working its way through the insufficient padding.

"No wonder poor Hetman was restless," said Luba, compassionately, as Roman, taking up a pointed stone, began to hammer down the inconvenient piece of iron.

In another ten minutes they were on horseback, and wending their way back through the lonely forest, now pleasantly cool and refreshing. Luba had no cause to complain of inattention on Roman's part. He kept a tight grip of the leading-rein, and repeatedly inquired whether she did not feel tired or faint.

"What a scolding your sister will give me when she hears of the accident!" he said, as in the twilight they approached Stara-Wola. "But I richly deserve it; I know I do."

"Why should she ever know?" asked Luba, rather shyly. "I shall not say a word about it; let it be a secret between us."

"You are an angel!" cried Roman, impulsively; and a minute later he added, "and let the photograph be a secret, too. Do me a favor by not mentioning it to either Felicyan or Hala. No one is to know of it but you and me; you will promise me that, will you not?"

Luba promised, oh how gladly! The thought of having a secret with him was rapture.

"I am sorry our ride turned out so unfortunately," said Roman, as he assisted her to dismount before the white house.

Luba did not speak, but she thought to herself that the ride had been a very fortunate one indeed. To be called an angel, and have her hand kissed by Roman Starowolski, she would have been content to fall from her horse and bruise her forehead every day in the year !

CHAPTER XVI.

LAPIS-LAZULI.

"What say you to such a supper with such a woman?"

—BYRON.

JUNE had made place to July, and Countess Massalowska still lingered in Warsaw. She could not get away yet, it seemed, having still some business arrangements to complete. Biruta had, however, already signed the papers which made over the property to her late husband's cousin, but of this fact the world at large was not aware.

It was a hot, sultry morning, with no prospect of rain to relieve the heavy atmosphere. Countess Massalowska had risen late, and, attired in a loose muslin *peignoir*—which displayed rather freely that which it was supposed to conceal—was taking a turn in the garden before breakfast, along with Gogo, her inseparable companion.

A large Japanese fan, held in one hand, was intended to ward off the scorching rays, but she seldom made use of it, and suffered it mostly to dangle carelessly by her side, as thoughtfully she paced the broad gravel walk. She was pondering deeply, wondering how many more such lonely mornings and evenings she would have to pass before the mission was accomplished, and she would be at liberty to rejoin her affianced husband.

The approach of a servant broke in upon these musings. General Vassiljef waited outside, she was told. He craved permission to come in for a moment and pay his respects.

Biruta hesitated, and cast a doleful glance at her muslin dressing-gown. It was not her custom to receive gentlemen *en déshabille*; and, besides, it was so early, scarcely eleven o'clock. She was about to utter a negative reply, when a sudden thought caused her to change her mind.

"Yes, show the general in here. I shall be delighted to see him," and with outstretched hands she advanced to meet the new-comer, who had closely followed the servant's footsteps.

"You are welcome, general, thrice welcome."

Vassiljef, much flattered, pressed an enamoured salute on each white hand. He was carefully attired in gala uniform, and carried a black leather portfolio under his arm.

"I only returned from St. Petersburg late last night, so I have taken the liberty of stepping in for a moment on my way to the governor, to wish good-morning to the fairest of countesses, and to restore the necklace so graciously intrusted to my care."

"A moment! Why, you must stay and breakfast with me. I positively will not take a refusal. You have no idea how lonely I have been lately. I have not spoken to a creature this past week."

"Not even to your models?"

"I have no models. It is too hot to paint now. I have given it up."

"And that picture you were engaged upon when I left—did you finish it?"

"It did not turn out well, so I rubbed it out."

"Then your handsome shepherd did not answer after all?"

"No—o; he did not answer—as a model."

The general gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"I thought you would get tired of him before long. There really was nothing so remarkable about that young man that I could perceive. Handsome—yes; but a weak kind of face, at best. A little wanting in character, in originality, don't you think?"

Biruta, not caring to discuss this point, proposed an adjournment to the dining-room.

A Russian breakfast is quite as substantial as a Scotch one, being ushered in by potent liqueurs and brandies, accompanying *caviare* and salted fish, as a slight introduction to hot and cold meat-dishes and various cakes and

jams. The steaming brass *samovar** on the sideboard is there to supply endless cups of fragrant tea, such as can only be drunk in Russia, modified, as tastes require, by sliced lemon and rum, its invariable condiments in this country.

Countess Massalowska was acquainted with General Vassiljef's tastes, and ministered to them accordingly, putting fully a third of rum into the teacup, which with her own fair hand she bestowed upon him, dispensing with the assistance of a servant. It was so much more sociable, she remarked, to breakfast alone with one's friends.

The general had breakfasted already; nor had his repast been of an insignificant nature, but he had no objection to repeating the process, especially in such charming company.

"And wherefore this dazzling splendor, *mon général*?" asked Biruta, when she had fulfilled her duties as hostess. "Is it for my solitary benefit that you are thus magnificently got up at this early hour?"

The general would have liked to introduce a neat compliment about no dress being sufficiently gorgeous to array the happy man permitted to appear before his goddess, but, not seeing his way to do so gracefully, was forced to fall back upon truth.

"I am bidden to Gurko at twelve o'clock."

"To the governor? Ah, yes, so you said before. And what does he want with you?" she pursued idly, not feeling any particular interest in the subject.

"I have to deliver some important documents regarding the business which took me to St. Petersburg."

"Really? What sort of documents?"

"Military dispositions regarding . . . Nothing that you would care to hear about, fair countess."

"But, supposing I do care to hear about it!" said Biruta, her eyes alight with a curious expression that might have put another man on his guard, but which General Vassil-

* A sort of urn, heated with charcoal, used throughout Russia and Poland.

jef, his head all confused with love and rum, failed to interpret. "I want to know what is this mighty business that has kept you so long away from us."

The general's rubicund countenance positively glowed with delight.

"You did me the honor to miss me—to find my absence long?"

"So incomprehensibly long!" said Biruta, warming to her part, "that I began to think you must have lost your heart to some fair daughter of the Neva."

He looked at her with tender reproach in his small Kal-mouck eyes.

"Divine Biruta, you insult your humble servant by such base insinuations. Surely you know that I have no more heart to lose?"

"I know nothing, and will believe nothing, unless you tell me how your time has been employed," said Countess Massalowska, turning away her head with a sudden assumption of coldness. "Why did you remain away for three whole weeks instead of one, as you had intended?"

"Because I was detained by the minister of war, who wished me personally to receive and deliver these papers to Gurko."

"And these papers are about what?"

"Simply the working out of the new mobilization plan for the troops stationed in Poland. It is not to every one that the minister would have cared to intrust them." And the general drew up his little squat figure with the self-important smirk that with him did duty for dignity.

"I see," said Biruta, thoughtfully, and then lapsed into silence, not seeming to notice the ardent, sensuous glances of which she was the object. Presently she said aloud,

"And so you really must go to-day to the governor?"

"At twelve o'clock," he said, with a regretful sigh. "I must be off in five minutes. I only stopped here in passing in order to deliver the necklace."

"Ah, the necklace! By-the-by, I had quite forgotten; where is it?"

Vassiljef now produced a red velvet *étui*, in which re-

posed some tasteful ornaments in lapis-lazuli—little blue balls linked together by filigree gold chains.

"You have executed my commission to perfection, general," said Biruta. "How shall I ever thank you?"

"By suffering me to name my reward."

"And what may that be?"

"The privilege of clasping the necklace round your fair neck."

"If that is all, you are welcome to try your skill," said Countess Massalowska, readily, as she rose and placed herself before a large pier-glass in a corner of the room. "Let us see if you will make an efficient *femme de chambre*."

The old warrior was breathing very hard, rather like an enamoured porpoise, and his fingers were not over-steady as he handled the lapis necklet. Biruta was gazing fixedly at her own reflection in the mirror—the reflection of a tall, fair woman, with a sphinx-like smile on her well-curved lips. Presently the blue ornaments glittered on the snowy cambric, and another face appeared near hers in the mirror.

General Vassiljef seemed to find some difficulty in fastening the clasp, for he bent very low over the white neck that was so plainly visible through the transparent fabric, and his fingers now were trembling like those of a man in a fit of ague.

"Well, general," said Biruta, impatiently, "can you not get the snap to fasten? You are not over-skilful, it seems."

Vassiljef, for all answer, bent lower still, and, as though drawn by an irresistible attraction which he was powerless to withstand, pressed his lips against her snowy shoulder with such fierce passion that the prickly contact of his stubbly moustache was plainly felt through the muslin.

Biruta started violently aside, and the blue necklace fell clattering to the floor. Her eyes flashed angrily, and her bosom rose and fell in stormy indignation. By a supreme effort she restrained herself, however, and when she spoke it was almost in her usual voice.

"You are too audacious, *mon générale*; you must not take such liberties—yet."

Vassiljef incoherently stammered forth some excuse which seemed to express contrition without promising amendment.

At this moment a clock in the hall struck a quarter to twelve.

"You will be late at the governor's," exclaimed the countess.

The general pressed his hand over his forehead with an air of bewilderment; he seemed to have forgotten all about the governor.

"Where is my casque?" he said, putting out his arm in a blind, groping fashion.

"Here," said Biruta, picking up from off a chair the white-plumed helmet and holding it towards him.

Mechanically he took it and turned to go. At the threshold he paused, and said:

"And may I come again, divine Biruta? You will not banish your humble slave from your presence?"

"Oh, yes, you may come again," she replied with a smile, in which no trace of anger could be detected.

CHAPTER XVII.

MOBILIZATION.

"Eripuit Jovi fulmen viresque tonandi."

—MANILIUS.

WHEN General Vassiljef had gone, Biruta walked back to the mirror and picked up the necklace from the floor, carefully examining it to make sure that it had sustained no injury from the fall. For some minutes she remained standing before the glass with the necklace in her hand, letting the little blue balls slip indolently through her fingers, almost as though she were telling her beads. She had only now realized the full extent of her power over the general, and was debating within herself how best she might turn this power to account.

"It is a pity he was so hurried to-day," she reflected; "half an hour more, and I could have made him tell me anything I chose. He shall do so next time—yes, even though I have again to run the risk of his odious familiarity. But it is hateful—hateful—hateful!" she exclaimed aloud, covering her face with both hands, as, at recollection of what had just passed, a crimson flush mounted to her forehead.

Her next action was to draw nearer to the mirror, and, pushing aside the cambric folds, carefully to scrutinize the spot so lately desecrated by the contact of the old *roué's* lips, almost as though she feared to find it branded with an ignominious scar; for Biruta was as pure as well as a proud woman, and though her purity was less the result of innocence than of a certain cynical self-respect, the part she was playing was very odious to her, and it was one she had never attempted to play before. It could not be otherwise than repulsive, loving another man as she

did, with all the intensity of a strong nature long deprived of its legitimate rights.

"If Roman only knew," she murmured, putting up a hand to feel the firm white shoulder, its surface smooth and equal as the petals of a pale blush rose. No, there was no trace here of the vexatious incident, she saw with relief. "And, after all, is it not for Roman's sake that I am doing this?" Biruta mused on, as she fastened the *peignoir*, "To win for him glory, honor, reputation—the prize at stake, his happiness and my own—are they not worth some sacrifice on my part? And I am only doing violence to my personal tastes in order to gain a victory for him, while at the same time I am avenging my father's wrongs."

Biruta was quite honest in thus reasoning with herself, and unconscious of any flaw in her logic. Accustomed all her life to possess whatever thing she had set her heart upon, it did not even occur to her mind that happiness might exist quite independently of success in this particular intrigue, nor did it strike her as at all inconsistent that the idea of avenging her father's wrongs should have sprung up thus tardily.

It was a political task which she had set herself to accomplish, and the consciousness that she was going to do something which scarce another woman would have attempted gave the matter its peculiar zest. Having grown up, too, amid diplomatic surroundings, the ways of diplomacy were familiar to her; and, like most others who have learned to tread these involved and crooked paths, the sober monotony of the more straightforward and simpler roads of life had small attraction for her.

The necklace still in hand, Biruta turned from the mirror in order to restore the ornaments to their velvet case, and as she did so her eyes fell upon another object lying on the breakfast-table. It was the black leather portfolio which General Vassiljef had carried under his arm when he entered her presence—the portfolio which, as he had told her, contained important military documents from the War Office, and which this same forenoon he was to

have delivered to the governor. In the amorous confusion attendant on his exit, the general had actually overlooked the principal object of this morning's errand!

Biruta positively gasped as the probable importance of this oblivion burst in upon her rapidly working brain. Was it indeed true? Was it possible that fate had put into her hand, all in a moment, that which only just now she had been speculating how to obtain by a wearisome and distasteful process—by days, perhaps weeks, of plotting and intrigue?

She put out her right hand and touched the cold, shining leather of the portfolio, and as she did so the terrible gravity of what she was about to do rose up before her. High-treason—that is what this thing would be called if ever found out and traced to her. High-treason, when discovered, means prison, disgrace, Siberia, perhaps even death!—at least such, in Russia, are its current significations.

Biruta drew back her fingers as these thoughts rushed through her mind; but in the next minute she had put out both hands and laid hold of the portfolio in a strong, resolute grasp. Her determination was fixed. High-treason! and why not high-treason, if it would serve her ends? She was not the woman to let herself be scared by a mere word, by three wretched little syllables. High-treason let it be; she was ready to go that length for Roman's sake!

But there was no time to be lost. A minute's delay might risk discovery; so, hastily concealing the portfolio in a fold of the muslin dressing-gown, Biruta passed out through the vestibule and reached her bedroom unperceived. She threw the portfolio into a drawer, which she locked, and, having withdrawn the key, rang the bell for her maid.

The French *femme de chambre* had not yet finished arranging Countess Massalowska's luxuriant pale tresses when the sound of wheels was heard upon the gravel outside. In the next minute there was a hasty knock at the bedroom door, and a message to the effect that General Vassiljef had returned, and wished to speak to the countess on a matter of gravest importance.

"Tell him that I am dressing, but shall be down directly," replied Biruta, as, taking up the curling-irons, she began to burn the short hairs on her forehead.

It was, however, several minutes before she made her appearance, dressed in walking attire, her dangerous charms now concealed beneath a lace mantilla. She found the general pacing the vestibule in a state of indescribable agitation—his utterance thick and husky, his countenance flushed to a deep purple.

"Where is the portfolio?" he cried out, even before she had reached the bottom of the staircase.

Biruta looked at him with an admirable assumption of cold surprise.

"What portfolio?"

"The portfolio, the papers, the documents for Gurko. I only missed it when I was already in the ante-room."

"Really?"

"And it must be here; you surely must have seen it."

"I have seen nothing, for I was engaged at my toilet, but we can ask the servants. Here is Ivan; will you describe to him what it is that you are seeking?"

Ivan was the valet who had ushered in the general, a flat-faced, expressionless moujik of Mongol extraction. He did not remember having seen the portfolio, and did not seem very clearly to understand the meaning of the word; nor had he noticed whether the general carried anything under his arm on arriving and leaving the villa. He was very willing to search, however, and a five-rouble note, insinuatingly displayed by Vassiljef, caused him to crawl under tables and chairs, and assiduously, but ineffectually, to shake out curtains and carpets in quest of the missing object. He was next despatched to the garden, Biruta having suggested that General Vassiljef might possibly have dropped the portfolio there; but when, after ten minutes' bootless seeking, he returned empty-handed, the general's despair knew no bounds.

"But I am a lost man if it be not found!" he exclaimed, thoroughly sobered by panic—large drops of perspiration beginning to show on his deeply flushed forehead.

"I am sorry," said Biruta, with a careless shrug, "but you should have taken better care of these papers if they are really so important."

Something in her tone irritated the desperate man, and roused a passing suspicion.

"But it must be here, I tell you—I am positive that I brought it here; where is my portfolio? Give it back to me at once!"

"General Vassiljef! You forget yourself!"

"And is it not enough to make any man forget himself? Some one has taken it—some one has stolen my papers! But I will have them back, as sure as my name is Vassiljef! Ay, if I have to set on foot the whole police of Warsaw!"

Biruta felt that she was changing color, but it was now too late to go back upon what she had done; there was nothing for it but to brazen out the situation, even at the risk of making Vassiljef her mortal enemy. She laid her finger-tips upon his arm.

"Do you mean to insult me, general?"

"Pardon me; yes, I am excited. I do not know what I am saying. No insult was intended; but some one—a servant, perhaps—might have taken the opportunity of appropriating the portfolio."

"Is it likely?" said Countess Massalowska, pointing to the blue lapis necklet that still lay on the breakfast-table between the cups and plates. "A thief would infinitely have preferred taking this to a parcel of musty old papers, which could have no possible value for him."

"That is true," said the unfortunate man, recognizing the force of the argument; "but then, where has my portfolio gone to? It cannot have vanished into empty air."

"The only thief I know of hereabouts is Gogo," went on Biruta, pursuing her advantage; "and he certainly has a particular weakness for paper of any kind. Only the day before yesterday he devoured my sketch of the convent of St. Bonaventura at Rome. It disagreed with him, I am sorry to say, for the sky was already washed in with ultramarine blue."

"St. Bonaventura be d—d!" exclaimed the general, roughly; "what has that got to do with my portfolio?"

"Only that it might have gone the same way as the sketch, down Gogo's throat."

The vision thus evoked of the whole Russian mobilization plan devoured and digested by a wretched bear-cub was too appalling. General Vassiljef took out a large red silk pocket-handkerchief and passed it over his moist, shiny forehead.

"That would be dreadful, terrible," he groaned.

"Terrible," agreed Biruta, who, having completely regained her self-possession, derived a keen satisfaction from thus tormenting her victim, much as a cat loves to play with a captured mouse. "Poor Gogo would certainly be ill if he had swallowed such an amount of paper. But let us not take such an unnecessarily gloomy view of the case, though I shall certainly give him a little sulphur in his water by way of precaution; after all, you need not have dropped your portfolio here. It may just as well have fallen from the carriage on the way to the governor's."

"You think so? You really think so?" he inquired, with a gleam of renewed hope in his eye.

"What more likely?"

General Vassiljef was silent for a minute, then he shook his head.

"No, it is not likely," he said, relapsing into despondency. "It could not have fallen without my having noticed it. I should certainly have felt it slip from my hand."

"I hardly think so, in the—state in which you left my house."

"What do you mean, countess?"

"I only mean that you had breakfasted rather too well, and that neither your hand nor your head were over-steady when you went away. Unless you had been *grisé, mon général*, you never could have ventured on such an extraordinary liberty with me as what you took before the looking-glass."

The callous little laugh which accompanied her words

would have driven many a calmer man to frenzy. General Vassiljef opened his mouth as though to speak, but fury checked his utterance ; then, turning abruptly, he left the room and staggered to his carriage.

Biruta watched his departure with a palpitating heart.

"The die is cast," she said to herself. "Everything now depends upon speed and secrecy, for, ten to one, the house will be searched and the police put on my track."

Within an hour Countess Massalowska had left Warsaw.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHEAT.

“Wie kommt mir solcher Glanz in meiner Hütte?”

—SCHILLER.

LUBA, accompanied by the children in the donkey-cart, had been to the forest to gather strawberries. On returning to the house somewhat later in the afternoon, she was informed that her sister was in the big saloon entertaining a visitor.

“What sort of visitor?”

“A lady, a very grand lady indeed, but no one knew her name. She has never been here before.”

Entering the room some five minutes later, she recognized Countess Biruta Massalowska as the same who had caused such commotion in the village church on Easter Sunday.

The countess turned round eagerly as the door opened, and then, on perceiving Luba, gave a short, quick sigh that sounded like disappointment.

Hala introduced her sister, and Luba made a rather awkward courtesy, coloring deeply under the cold inspection of those large gray eyes.

Countess Massalowska had volunteered no explanation of her visit to Stara-Wola to-day. There was no particular reason, it would seem, why she should now suddenly call upon Madame Starowolska, after having ignored the neighborhood for so long. But then, after all, there was no reason why she should not call, thought Hala. It certainly was very flattering to reflect that the countess had taken the trouble to drive two hours on a boiling July day, merely to visit a country neighbor. To be sure, she did not seem to have very much to say, now that she was here; conversation languished, and the great lady listened

but absently to the homely chit-chat about field and garden, of which the talk between country neighbors is mostly made up.

"Have you already begun to cut at Wodniki, countess?" resumed Hala, after a little pause occasioned by Luba's entrance.

"To cut what?" inquired Biruta, with an uncomprehending stare.

It was now Hala's turn to stare. Surely every one knew that only one thing was cut in July, and that upon the success of this cutting depends the farmer's prosperity for the rest of the year.

"The wheat; we are already cutting ours. It is fully a week sooner than usual, but everything has been early this year, and it would have been unwise to delay further for fear of hail or thunder-storms. We began on Monday, and hope to have it stacked early next week. Is your harvest further on?" she finished, a little anxiously.

"I really do not know," said Countess Massalowska, beginning to fan herself with her lace pocket-handkerchief as she leaned back. "Yes, I think I noticed some workmen in the fields as I came along, but I am not very sure whether it was wheat or grass that they were cutting."

Hala and Luba looked at the countess with curious admiration, vainly endeavoring to grasp the vast difference between themselves and this marvellous being, so far removed from the prosaic details of every-day country life as to have no comprehension for them.

"This is the first summer you are spending here, countess?" said Hala, after another rather long pause, which the stranger made no effort to break.

"And the last," said Biruta, stifling a yawn; "there really is nothing to be done here in the country that I can see, but I was unfortunately detained by—business."

Refreshments were now produced—strawberries, sour cream, honey, home-made preserves, and such like country dainties, of which, however, Biruta partook but sparingly. She ate about half a dozen strawberries, and then laid down her spoon with a preoccupied expression.

It was becoming more and more difficult to keep up conversation, and Hala kept racking her brain in search of a topic likely to interest such a distinguished visitor. The wheat had evidently been a dead failure. She must think of something more suitable.

"I am sorry our melons are not yet ripe," she said at last regretfully, but also with a little conscious pride; for the fact of possessing melons at all, whether ripe or unripe, was in itself a credit to Stara-Wola. Very few houses in their neighborhood could boast of such distinction. She thought to herself that it would have looked very well indeed if she had been able to offer a melon to Countess Massalowska; a melon is such a refined, thoroughly aristocratic fruit, that it could not have failed to produce a favorable impression of the Stara-Wola establishment. But if the melons could not be eaten, at least they could be talked about. Talking was not as good as eating, of course, but still it was better than nothing.

"We had five last summer."

"Really?" said the countess, listlessly.

At this moment the door opened, and Biruta turned round again with the air of anxious expectation she had worn on Luba's entrance.

It was only the old grandfather coming in quest of the flies, which, attracted by the sweet viands, had assembled in large numbers. A thick black cluster was hanging upon the dish of the honeycomb, and the glass cream-jug had become the scene of the desperate struggle of a dozen drowning insects.

Madame Starowolska, probably feeling conscious that the appearance on the scene of her old imbecile father in his shabby Turkish dressing-gown was highly undesirable, and might tend to destroy the favorable impression produced by the talk about melons, rose hastily in order to intercept his entrance. With some difficulty Pan Nicorowicz was induced to betake himself to another apartment, and, in order to effect this, Hala had to coax and humor him like a spoiled, unreasonable child, her whispered expostulations and the old man's fretful whimperings being plainly audible through the half-open door.

Biruta and Luba were now left alone.

"Will you not take some more strawberries?" said Luba, feeling that it was incumbent on her to play hostess, adding, timidly, "I gathered them myself in the forest this afternoon."

"You gathered them yourself in this terrible heat? How tired you must be!" said the countess, with a little compassionate surprise, wondering how a person could stoop a hundred times in succession merely in order to pick up little red berries which any fool could gather.

"Oh, but I like gathering strawberries, and I am not at all tired," returned Luba. "It is very amusing, though not as amusing, of course, as toadstools. And, besides, I did not gather them all myself," she added, with her usual literal veracity. "The children helped me, and Roman, too, for a time."

"Roman!"

The exclamation escaped Biruta's lips unawares; but Luba, taking it for an interrogation, replied accordingly:

"Yes, Hala's brother-in-law. Roman is Felicyan's younger brother—his step-brother, that is to say, for he had a different mother. He is an officer in the German army."

"And so you left him—Captain Starowolski, I mean—in the forest gathering strawberries?"

"No," said Luba, with a half-stifled sigh; "he left the forest first, more than an hour ago. He was going to rejoin Felicyan in the wheat-field." It did not occur to her to wonder how it came about that Countess Massalowska had guessed Roman's military rank correctly.

"Ah, yes, the wheat that your sister was telling me about. Is this field far from the house?"

"About ten minutes' walk."

"Indeed!" said the countess, no longer leaning back in the exhausted attitude of a few minutes since. She was sitting bolt upright now, and her face expressed keen interest and animation. "If it is really so near, I should rather like to have a look at your brother-in-law's wheat, so as to compare it with the harvest at Wodniki. I should

also be glad to make Pan Starowski's acquaintance," she added as an afterthought.

Luba was very willing to act as guide, and could see nothing unnatural in Countess Massalowska's newly awakened interest in the wheat. Rather the indifference of a little while ago had seemed to her unnatural.

Fully half the grain had already fallen beneath the scythe, and lay stretched over the field in long golden lines, which, thickly sprinkled with dying blood-red poppies and fast-bleaching corn-flowers, were like as many faded garlands festooned across their path. But yonder, where the field sloped upwards to the forest edge, the wheat still stood erect and proud; and the flowers between the rigs, redolent of life and color, deemed not that Death was at hand, and that ere another sunset they too would be lying prostrate.

Luba and the countess picked their way over the field, the latter not taking the trouble to hold up her trailing gown of pale-blue muslin and creamy Valenciennes, and serenely indifferent to its destruction; but Luba cast timid, aghast glances at the havoc she witnessed, and gave a little audible gasp each time the prickly stubble laid hold anew of the costly lace trimmings, metamorphosing them into ragged, unsightly fringes.

The reapers, grouped about at the upper end of the field, were preparing to go home, some wiping their heated faces, or polishing their scythes with wisps of grass against tomorrow's work—the women tying up broken remains of victuals in colored pocket-handkerchiefs. Some of the younger members were indulging in a little promiscuous flirtation; and there was scarcely a girl who had not sought to embellish herself by a few bright flowers, stuck in hair or bosom.

Luba cast about her eyes in search of Felicyan and Roman.

"Where is the master?" she asked of a reaper.

The overseer, a gray-haired peasant now approaching, explained that the gentlemen had left the field half an hour previously. They were going to row on the river, it

seemed, and Pan Starowski had taken his gun with him, as he mostly did, in case of winging a stray water-fowl.

Felicyan was fond of a row on fine evenings like this; it was about the only pastime in which he ever indulged, and Roman, desirous of extending his knowledge of the Vistula and its banks, was always very ready to accompany him. Sometimes they would make excursions to a considerable distance down the river, trusting to the chance of a returning steamer to bring them home again, the boat in tow.

A short exclamation of disappointment escaped Biruta's lips.

"Then when will he—your brother-in-law—return, do you think?"

"Very late, probably," said Luba, serenely; "not before nightfall, at all events. When there is moonlight, as at present, they often go very far, and then Hala and I take our supper alone with the children. But I know about the wheat quite as well as Felicyan, and can explain it all to you," she added, with a pretty little business-like air. "The tenth part of the wheat belongs to the reapers as payment. Some of the proprietors about here pay the wages in money, but this way is far the best—don't you think so? It insures the people having something to eat in the winter, instead of spending all their money in drink. Felicyan's peasants are far more sober than those of many of our neighbors."

But Countess Massalowska was not listening. Her agricultural interest seemed to have been exhausted with the effort of walking across the field. She sat down deliberately on a sheaf of straw, and appeared to be reflecting deeply, with her eyes bent on the ground. Looking up presently, she said, "Sit down here beside me," accompanying her words with an imperious gesture. Then when the girl was seated, she asked abruptly, "Roman Starowski is your brother-in-law. Is he also your friend?"

Luba colored deeply, and sought to cover her embarrassment by plucking a large ox-eye daisy that had escaped being guillotined by the scythe.

"He is not exactly my brother-in-law, only the brother of my sister's husband. He is really Hala's brother-in-law."

Biruta made an impatient gesture. "That is nearly the same thing. You have known him for years."

"Known? not precisely known, for I only saw him once before, at Hala's wedding, and I was quite a little girl then—just ten years old. I only really made acquaintance with him this year about three months ago."

"So did I," said Biruta, *sotto voce*, and added aloud, "But now, of course, you know him well, and you are good friends I suppose?"

Luba began nervously to divest the ox-eye daisy of its petals. "Yes," she said, very low, "we are friends;" and then all at once it struck her as strange that the countess should be asking these questions of her. What could she possibly know of the relations between herself and Roman Starowski? so she said aloud, rather shyly, "How do you know that we are—friends?"

"Because it is only natural that you should be so, and he seems to be much attached to his brother's family."

Luba opened her black eyes very wide.

"You know him—Roman?"

"Yes; I met Captain Starowski at Warsaw this spring. Did he never mention my name to you?"

Luba shook her head.

"But he has often mentioned yours," said Biruta, who had begun to reflect that when she married Roman Starowski, Hala and Luba would also be related to her. They, too, would be her sisters-in-law after a fashion. "I knew all about Stara-Wola and its inmates before I came here."

Luba thought that she was beginning to understand, because it is so easy, so fatally easy, to understand that which we desire to believe. Evidently this grand lady, who had dropped so unexpectedly in their midst, took a kindly interest in the family. Was it, after all, impossible that Roman had made of her a confidante? had confided to her certain hopes and aspirations regarding Luba herself? Why otherwise should he have discussed Stara-Wola and

its inmates with the countess? Biruta's next words did not tend to destroy this impression.

"You have his welfare—his happiness—at heart?"

"Of course," stammered the girl.

"Listen; it is getting late, and I shall have to go back to Wodniki. I cannot wait much longer, but you will see Captain Starowolski this evening?"

"Hardly; he sometimes returns very late, and then I may be asleep."

"But you must not be asleep," said the countess imperiously; "you must see him and give him this parcel from me." Putting her hand in her pocket, she half withdrew a tight roll of paper, then hesitated and pushed it back again. "The risk is too great," she muttered; "a verbal message will be safer."

Hala was now seen approaching.

"Hear me, child," said Biruta, hurriedly; "I want you to give a message from me to Roman Starowolski. I would rather trust it to you than to your sister; you look more reliable, and wives have sometimes got a foolish habit of telling everything to their husbands. You have no husband, luckily."

"No, I have no husband," echoed Luba, rather pointlessly.

"And you are his friend, and have his happiness at heart? You said so before. Is it indeed true? May I trust you?"

"Of course you may trust me!" cried Luba, with sparkling eyes.

Biruta looked at the girl with dawning comprehension.

"You love Roman Starowolski? Do not deny it."

Luba neither denied nor confessed in words, but everything about her was a confession—her bashful droop of the head, her glowing cheek, and the tell-tale softness in her eyes.

Countess Massalowska gave a short, half-impatient sigh, then threw back her head as though to shake off some inconvenient burden.

"Well, it cannot be helped now," she said, more to her-

self than to Luba, "and perhaps all the better. If she loves him she will not betray him, at all events." Then seizing hold of the young girl's hand, she went on emphatically, "If you love Roman, you will be ready to serve him at any price. You must see him to-night and tell him from me to come early to-morrow to Wodniki. I have important news for him. Do you understand? or rather do not try to understand, but merely obey me. It is a matter of life or death, I tell you!"

Hala had almost reached them by this time, so the much bewildered Luba could only signify assent by a trembling pressure of the hand that held her own.

CHAPTER XIX.

ON THE VISTULA.

"I would it were bedtime, Hal, and all well."

—*Henry IV.*

THE lovely evening had tempted the two brothers to take a longer row than usual—up the river this time—and it was nearly nine o'clock before they thought of turning. There had not been much talk between them as yet, for rowing against a steady current is a very fair test of strength, and scarcely conducive to exchange of ideas; but once the boat turned homewards, there was almost nothing to do but let themselves glide indolently down stream.

There are few sensations so absolutely luxurious as the surrender of one's person to the keeping of a mighty river on a fine midsummer evening, when the stars are beginning to strew the water with silver spangles, and no sound is heard but the faint occasional dip of the oars, and the sobbing gurgle of the current as it sweeps through clumps of reeds and bulrushes.

Roman had taken the oars, and Felicyan, leaning back in the stern, was conscious of a vague sense of comfort and happiness. After toiling all day in the broiling wheat-field, and then rowing two hours up the river, he was feeling just now as though he had enlisted the services of a giant to bear him home in a powerful grasp. Almost without effort he would be carried thus along to his own door. Presently, however, he sat up in the boat and raised his gun as a pair of wild ducks, flying rather low, were passing overhead.

"For Heaven's sake, don't shoot, Felicyan," said Roman, irritably. "Can't you leave the poor creatures alone?"

"But why? You are not usually so tender-hearted,"

returned the elder with a smile, but nevertheless he lowered the gun.

"I have a headache—and, besides, I do not wish to attract attention; the shot might be heard."

"And what of that? I am accustomed to shoot ducks on the river. My right to do so has never yet been disputed. Any one who chooses is welcome to hear me."

"Oh, you are quite safe," said the younger brother, with a perceptible shade of irony in his tone; "no harm will ever come to you, my innocent, simple-minded brother. But the case with me is altogether different. Obscurity is safety, but the highest trees are always those most exposed to storm, and I cannot get rid of an idea, an uncomfortable sort of notion, that I have been watched lately."

"Good gracious, Roman! Watched by whom?"

"I cannot tell, but within the last few days I have frequently met a figure that seemed to be dogging my footsteps—a small, insignificant-looking fellow, but with a pair of terribly piercing eyes. I met him to-day in the forest when I joined the children and Luba at their strawberry hunt; and only last week he was smoking a pipe on the bench before the village pothouse, and talking to the landlord."

"Nonsense, Roman;" but Felicyan looked grave as he said it.

Roman passed his hand over his brow with a rather weary gesture.

"Maybe; and I should probably not have noticed the fact did I not feel sure that I have seen that face already at Warsaw; it certainly is not a country face."

"You may be mistaken."

"I cannot, of course, swear to it, but such is my impression, though, as you say, I may be mistaken. I have not felt very well lately, and am rather given to such nervous fancies."

"And you do not look well, Roman. Instead of picking up in this splendid air and quiet country life, you are looking ever so much worse than when you arrived."

It was true. Roman had lately lost flesh to a noticeable degree, and there was a feverish, haggard look in the face which almost belied its youthfulness. The difference between the two brothers was more striking now than it had been some weeks ago, for if Felicyan's work was harder in summer, so too was his appetite proportionately larger, and his figure had rather gained in size. Even the July sun in its tanning process had operated upon the brothers with unequal hand, for while Roman's classical features were enhanced by the pale bronze hue which gave him the appearance of some antique statue, Felicyan's broad face, red and freckled, was not unlike the harvest moon just rising yonder over the trees to the right bank of the river.

Felicyan, not at any time a very observant man, and absorbed just now by the intricacies of the harvest work, had not of late bestowed much thought upon his brother; and having no clew to the additional agitation of his secret engagement to Biruta, these effects of impaired sleep and appetite had escaped his notice. The object of Roman's mission was seldom alluded to between the brothers; it was not a subject on which they could ever think or feel alike, so there was no use in speaking of it. After that first conversation in the cart-shed on Easter Sunday, Felicyan had made no further attempt at dissuasion, nor had Roman volunteered any further information. Especially since his return from Warsaw the younger brother had been curiously reticent, and had given but a meagre account of what he had done or left undone in the capital. Gradually Felicyan had almost ceased thinking about the matter; or perhaps he had unconsciously come to consider this secret mission as something far more harmless than had at first sight appeared. But now, his attention having been this way directed, the dormant fears sprang up again, in a moment developed to full-grown phantoms. He laid his hand on Roman's shoulder.

"Roman, this sort of life is not good for you. When will this wretched business be ended?"

"I do not know. It may be days only, or it may be weeks. It is impossible to foresee."

"But what are you waiting for? Have you not yet collected all the statistics you require?"

"I am waiting for news from Warsaw. Upon what I hear will depend my further movements;" and below his breath he added, "God knows how hard it is to wait!"

"You have confided your secret to some one? You have an accomplice?"

"A confederate, an ally," corrected Roman.

"But is he sure? Is it a man whom you can trust?"

There was silence, broken only by the surging roll of the water curling round a sharp point of rock, and the cry of a water-fowl somewhere among the reeds.

Felicyan repeated his question.

"It is a woman," said Roman, hoarsely.

"A woman! Oh, Roman!"

"And why not a woman?" said the other, almost fiercely.

"Why should not a woman help me to do this?"

"Perhaps—I do not know—only I have never thought of this, and it seems to me that—"

"What, Felicyan?"

"That it is not woman's work at all."

"Why not? They are cleverer than we are at such things."

Felicyan shook his head.

"A bad woman would be a dangerous tool to employ, and a good woman should not let herself be so employed."

Roman laughed—a harsh, discordant laugh.

"That is just one of your terribly old-fashioned, simple-minded notions, Felciu; you fancy that a woman nowadays can be like our grandmothers, spending her life between the kitchen and the nursery, just as you imagine that modern warfare consists in hand-to-hand combat. We two will never think alike upon any point."

And yet just upon this very point they were, unconsciously, agreed. Roman felt the truth of his brother's words, and for that very reason they irritated him. In theory he had seen no objection to female spies; it was only the thought of Biruta being one that had lately become intolerable to him.

"And this woman, your ally, why is she doing this? For money, or out of friendship for you?" resumed Felicyan.

"It is more than—than friendship," said Roman, speaking almost in a whisper.

"For love, then! Oh, my poor Roman, how will it all end? And her name?"

"I cannot tell you more at present, not even her name. I had not meant to say even this much; but I may trust you, Felicyan, to be silent."

"As the grave. But I wish, oh, I wish, for your sake, that these hateful secrets and mysteries were at an end."

"So do I," said Roman with a sigh, relapsing into a brown study.

It was Felicyan who, after a time, broke silence again as they were passing a promontory overhung by bending willows that were casting black shadows into the moonlit water.

"Do you remember this place?" he asked, suddenly.

No; Roman did not remember it. To his eyes it looked much the same as any other spot on the river.

"Why, it is here that you fell in twenty-two years ago. Even now I can never pass this spot without shuddering at what might have been."

A long-forgotten scene in Roman's childhood now rose up before his eyes; yes, it was here, close to that farthest trunk, that the boat had been moored. Felicyan, then a youth of nineteen, had taken his little brother out to fish, and sat at one end of the boat absorbed in arranging the tackle. It was a lovely spring morning, and now, as it all came back to his mind, Roman distinctly recollected how countless large blue dragon-flies and dancing brown midges had been disporting themselves on the water's surface, pursued by nimble swallows, who secured their victims without ever halting in their flight. Presently a large branch of hawthorn, thickly laden with blossom, had come floating by quite near the boat, and a whiff of its perfume had filled the boy with a great longing to secure the prize. He stretched out his arms—there—he could almost touch

it—a little farther yet! In the next instant he had lost his balance, and, falling over, was swept away by the current.

"Felicyan, save me!" he had called out. And, mingled with terror of the cold, dark waters enfolding him in their moist embrace, there had been confidence in his childish heart—confidence in that big, strong brother to whom he was used to turn in every difficulty. Felicyan would not let him be drowned, he felt sure.

When Roman had opened his eyes again, Felicyan, his own clothes dripping wet, was kneeling beside him on the bank. "Thank God, my little Roman, that you are safe!" he said; then, overpowered by the reaction of relief succeeding the agony of the last few minutes, had burst into tears.

Roman had probably not thought of this incident for years, but now, conjured up by a word, the whole scene had grown alive again, and with it every detail of the illness which had succeeded the accident. With what unremitting care Felicyan had tended him during those weary, sleepless nights of pain and fever. He saw it all again now; how could he have forgotten the place?

With a sudden impulse he stretched out his hand towards his brother.

"Yes, now I remember. You were awfully good to me, Felciu—you always were!"

And then, as it was getting late, the two brothers laid hold of their oars in earnest, and in silence rowed home.

CHAPTER XX.

MOONSHINE.

"The quarrel is a very pretty quarrel as it stands ; we should only spoil it by trying to explain it."—SHERIDAN.

THE two brothers supped alone, for Hala and Luba had already retired to their respective apartments, but Felicyan, entering the bedroom half an hour later, found Hala still sitting before the glass combing her long black hair.

She was very lively and talkative to-night, and kept dwelling on each detail of Countess Massalowska's visit with almost childish exultation. It was so kind, so very kind of her, to have driven that long distance in this broiling heat, merely in order to make our acquaintance. Did not Felicyan think so ? And she had worn such a beautiful dress—pale blue with white lace trimmings (here Hala gave a little envious sigh); and the horses were so beautifully groomed, not rough and ugly like ours, but smooth as satin. And was it not a pity that Hala had no melons ready to offer the visitor ? But she had mentioned that they were not yet ripe, so that at least the countess might know that they had melons at Stara-Wola. Did Felicyan think that she had done right in speaking of the melons ? On reflection, she was afraid that it might have looked too boastful; well, not exactly boastful, but just a little pretentious, perhaps ?

Felicyan had sat down to finish his pipe before going to bed; he wore his usual working-dress—a coat of faded fustian—and had on his feet a pair of particularly clumsy boots.

He listened but absently to Hala's lively prattle, his mind still running on the conversation with Roman in the boat a little while ago.

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"And, oh, Felciu! do you know such a dreadful thing nearly happened? Just as I had served out the strawberries and cream, the door opened, and papa wanted to come in. I had ever so much difficulty in making him go away. Only fancy how terrible it would have been!"

"What would have been terrible?" asked Felicyan, rousing himself to a show of interest.

"Why, for the countess to have seen papa in his old dressing-gown, of course. What would she have thought of us all?"

Felicyan laughed rather loudly; somehow his mind refused to grasp the full gravity of the old dressing-gown. Hala, usually so sweet-tempered, felt unaccountably irritated by this laugh.

"I wish you would not laugh so loud, Felicyan. It is not—not elegant at all. Roman laughs in quite a different manner."

"I dare say," said Felicyan, placidly, knocking the ashes out of his pipe; "but, all the same, I can see nothing so very terrible about papa's old dressing-gown."

"Nothing terrible! Why, I should have sunk into the ground with shame."

Felicyan yawned, and began to take off his boots.

"What a pity you were not at home this afternoon!" remarked Hala after a while. "But perhaps she will come again. She is evidently disposed to be friendly, and she talked for quite a long time with Luba in the corn-field. I found them sitting together on a heap of straw; only think of that!"

"What am I to think of?"

"What is the matter with you to-night, Felicyan? You do not seem to understand or to listen to anything I say. Why, of course I only mean that it was rather surprising, and very—very gratifying, to see a grand lady like Countess Massalowska making herself so perfectly at home in our corn-field. She was sitting there on the sheaves, just as simply and naturally as—as I myself could have done. When she comes again the melons will

be ripe. And oh, Felicyan! you must give up wearing that terribly ugly coat!"

"Oh, yes; I intend to buy a new one next summer."

"But you cannot wear it a day longer, I tell you!" cried Hala, with unusual petulance; "it is as bad almost as papa's dressing-gown. You really must begin to dress more respectably, in case—in case—"

"In case your fine countess is gracious enough to come here again."

"Why do you call her my fine countess? It is not nice of you, Felicyan; and just look, you have strewn the tobacco-ashes all over the carpet! But I am glad, after all, that she did not see you to-day; you are a positive figure in that coat—I should have felt quite ashamed of you."

"Take care, Hala," said Felicyan with sudden gravity; "never say that you are ashamed of your husband. You may be sorry for it some day."

She did not answer, but went on plaiting up her hair as though she had not heard the words. Felicyan finished his toilet and got into bed without having said good-night. Hala remained sitting before the glass, looking rather sullenly at her own reflection. She felt dissatisfied with Felicyan—with herself, too, perhaps, without knowing it; and she had no inclination to sleep as yet.

The sound of a door opening struck upon her ear after a while. She listened attentively. Perhaps some one was ill. At any rate, she would go and see.

There was no need of a candle, for the moonlight flooding the corridor made everything distinctly visible. The door at the farther end, and leading on to the veranda, was open, affording a glimpse of the silvery landscape beyond, and letting in the voices of myriads of chirruping grasshoppers. Had the servants forgot to shut the door? or had one of the younger maids stolen out to some clandestine appointment under the stars? Hala was a strict disciplinarian, as it behooves every country lady to be, and would brook no such irregularities in her household. She would steal out on tiptoe and surprise the culprits. Yes, her surmise had been a correct one; two figures were

there on the veranda—a man and a girl. She could see their black silhouettes quite plainly between the pillars, and the low murmur of their whispering voices came mingled with the shrill chirrup of the grasshoppers. Lovers, of course.

While she was yet hesitating whether to call out or approach still nearer, the man turned his head; and as the moonlight struck full on his profile, Hala with a start recognized her brother-in-law. He appeared agitated, and was speaking eagerly to his companion; and this companion was—Luba!

Madame Starowolska almost shrieked out the name aloud in the first shock of surprise; then, obeying some unaccountable impulse which forbade her to pry on her sister's secrets, she crept back to the bedroom unseen and unheard, her brain all in a whirl. Roman loved Luba! She had long expected it; but why this secrecy—this clandestine meeting? Why did he not ask for her hand boldly in the open light of day? But he was romantic probably, and wished to enjoy something of the poetry of courtship before proceeding to more conventional details; and Hala sighed a little as she remembered how utterly devoid of such poetical episodes her own courtship had been. Felicyan had never made love to her by moonlight on a veranda. He had never made love to her at all, in fact, and had spoken to her father before addressing himself to her. Roman's proceeding was irregular, of course; she would have to speak to Luba about it; it was clearly her duty to do so, but in her heart she sympathized, and she need not compromise her sister by revealing this foolish little escapade to Felicyan.

"What is the matter?" he asked, sleepily, as Hala re-entered the bedroom.

She came and sat down on the foot of her husband's bed; her eyes were sparkling and her cheek flushed. The excitement of this new discovery had quite banished her irritation of just now.

"What is the matter?" repeated Felicyan, not so sleepily this time, struck by his wife's expression.

"Oh, Felciu! I must tell you something. Such a delightful piece of news! I am so happy it is all right!"

"What is all right?"

"Roman and Luba. Just what I have been wishing for."

"Roman and Luba? What have they got to do with each other?"

"They love each other. I suspected it long ago, and now I am sure of it."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Felicyan, now fully aroused.

"What rubbish are you prating, child?"

"It is true. I have seen it coming all along."

"But I tell you it is nonsense," he returned, somewhat roughly, and sitting up in bed as he said it. "You must have been dreaming to have got such an absurd idea into your head."

"Oh, very well," returned Hala, loftily. "I have got no eyes in my head, I suppose; that is what men always think of us. And it is they who are blind, who do not see what is going on under their very noses."

"What has been going on?"

"Roman's attachment to Luba."

"He does not even think of her," said Felicyan, with great decision.

Hala was not to be shaken in her conviction. Had she not seen with her own eyes?

"I have the proofs!" she said, triumphantly.

"What proofs?"

Here Hala became a little confused. She could not betray her sister; it would not be loyal or delicate.

"Is not his whole conduct a proof that he loves her? He originally came here to stay only for a few days, and now he has been nearly three months. Why else should he remain, unless for Luba's sake?"

"Ah, is that all?" said Felicyan, apparently much relieved. "That is nothing."

"What further proof would you have? He was so anxious to take that ride with her alone the other day."

"It was very foolish of you to allow that ride. I told

you so already ; and Hetman's back will not be healed for another week at least. I should never have suffered Luba to go alone with him if I had been at home."

"And they stayed away quite five hours," went on Hala unheeding ; "and I do not know what he had said to her that day ; but Luba looked so happy when she returned, though she was a little pale and tired with the long ride in the heat, and she kissed me so often, as if she had something to tell. But she did not say anything exactly."

"And so you think—you fancy that Luba cares for Roman?"

"I am certain of it!" cried Hala, with conviction.

"But you must undeceive her at once! You must not encourage her in this delusion. Roman does not—never will care for her!"

Hala smiled with an air of superior wisdom.

"It is no delusion—what makes you think so?" Then, as he did not answer, she went on triumphantly: "There now! you have no possible reason to give at all, but your own stupid conviction that a thing cannot be because you are too blind to see it."

Felicyan was beginning to lose patience.

"Listen, Hala," he said, taking hold of her arm in a not very gentle grasp. "I tell you that this marriage you are dreaming of is a mere castle in the air. It cannot, will never take place ; and I forbid you—yes, forbid—to give any further encouragement to such idle fancies on Luba's part."

She shook her arm free from his grasp.

"Forbid! Am I a child or a servant to be ordered about?"

"No ; but you are a foolish woman who may do endless mischief by her obstinacy. I know that my brother will never marry your sister. If there has been a mistake, it must be rectified. If necessary I shall speak to Roman myself."

"And betray poor Luba! How noble, how delicate that would be!"

"Then it is you who must speak to your sister."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," said Hala, rising from the bed where she had been sitting, and beginning to pace the room excitedly. She had by this time contrived to work herself up into a very tolerable passion. "I will not act against my own conviction and my own good sense. What is it to you if they love each other? And I am positive that Roman is in love with Luba—far, far more in love than you ever were with me. Why should not my sister marry your brother? Maybe you do not consider her good enough for him? Is not our family equal to yours? Perhaps you wish your brother to make a richer and more brilliant marriage. If those are your opinions, it is a pity that you ever condescended to take a Nicorowicz yourself as a wife!"

Felicyan, though a good man, was not an angel, and only an angel could have swallowed this last taunt unmoved. It was not often that he lost his temper, least of all with his wife, but he did so now.

"It is a pity that you ever took a farmer for your husband if you are ashamed of the coat he wears!" escaped his lips almost before he was aware of it. In the next instant he was sorry for what he had said. The whole quarrel was based upon a misapprehension he recognized, only brought about by the necessity of keeping silence upon Roman's mission; and the mistake on Hala's part had not been an unnatural one. Yet now that these words had been spoken, he would not let her see that he regretted them just yet. He turned his face to the wall and feigned sleep, but it was long before sleep really came to him. Hala's words had hurt him deeply. Never since their marriage had she spoken to him thus bitterly, thus violently; though in the last few months, in the last few weeks especially, there had been almost imperceptible but constant little frictions between them. There had grown up, he did not exactly know how, a barrier in place of the full, hearty confidence and sympathy of former years. It was as if some disturbing element, which he could neither name nor define, had got into their lives, and was slowly

but surely estranging them. Hala had often appeared dissatisfied of late, though she had not said so in so many words—dissatisfied with Stara-Wola, with the house, with the carriage, with her dresses, and—yes—with her husband. With his manners, his boots, his pipe; and the attack upon the old fustian coat this evening had been but the sequel of many other such hints and innuendoes. He had always worn the same sort of boots, square-toed and hob-nailed, yet Hala had never taken umbrage at them before this summer. Why then had she lately made the discovery that they were clumsy and unbefitting his position? And his pipe, which he had smoked for years—and his father had smoked it before him—why was he now pressed to exchange it for the more delicately flavored cigarettes which Roman affected? What had come over him or her to produce this change?

But Felicyan was tired after a long day's work and the long row on the river, and he ended by falling asleep long before Hala had ceased pacing the room with agitated steps.

CHAPTER XXI.

WODNIKI.

"Thus far into the bowels of the land
Have we marched on without impediment."

—*Richard III.*

ROMAN, in obedience to Biruta's summons, took the first steamer up the river on the following morning, not knowing what news was to await him. Early in the forenoon he reached Wodniki, a massive gray pile of venerable appearance, lying deep in the pine-wood forest, out of sight of the river.

Biruta was waiting for him, outwardly composed, but very pale, and with darkly underlined eyes that spoke of inward anxiety and a sleepless night. She was dressed in plain travelling attire, and her trunks stood locked and roped in the hall.

Roman had not seen her for nearly three weeks, yet their meeting did not resemble a lover's meeting. Each felt instinctively that this was no time for soft words or tender caresses; that a great, a vital crisis in their lives had arrived.

"What is it?" he asked, shocked at her altered appearance.

"I don't quite know," she answered in a whisper, "whether it is victory or defeat, whether I have acted rightly or rashly; you will be able to judge when you have seen the papers. Come with me; I will show you where they are."

She led the way to a long, broad corridor which had once been the picture-gallery of the Massalowski family, but now, deserted and dismantled, presented a sorry appearance. The crimson damask that formerly covered the walls was ragged and threadbare, faded almost irrecog-

nizably from the original hue. Only at those places where pictures had lately hung the stuff had retained the color, thus forming ruby patches amidst the dirty brown of the surrounding material. Every picture of value had already been removed, and many of those enclosed in large packing-cases which stood about the gallery; only a few ill-conditioned ancestors or dingy landscapes, not deemed worthy of removal, still kept their places, with large gaps between them, and looking rather forlorn in their isolated position. On one of the largest packing-cases sat Gogo, exercising his beautifully pointed ivory teeth on the corner of a broken picture-frame.

Biruta went up to one of the pictures—a landscape blackened by age—and, cautiously introducing her arm behind the frame, she showed Roman a long rent in the crimson brocade, whence she drew out a parcel of papers that had been lying concealed there.

"I put them in there last night," she said, "on my return from Stara-Wola, for at any moment the castle might be searched; and one must be prepared for every contingency. I am, in fact, surprised that we have heard nothing as yet about the matter. General Vassiljef is not usually the man to let the grass grow beneath his feet. It is nearly twenty-four hours since it happened; time enough to put on foot the whole Warsaw police, as he threatened to do."

"The police? General Vassiljef? I do not understand."

"I have stolen his portfolio, that is all," returned Biruta, coolly. "And now you are to look at the papers and tell me what they are worth. Sit down there while I keep guard," she continued, unceremoniously pushing the bear off the low packing-case that stood at the farther end of the gallery, and motioning to Roman to take its place.

He obeyed, and spread out the papers on the box beside him, while Countess Massalowska, like a sentry, walked up and down the entrance of the corridor, whence a window commanded a straight cutting through the fir-woods, the only road by which the castle could be approached.

There was a long silence ; the only sound in it the slight rustle of paper as Roman nervously turned over sheet after sheet, and the echo of Countess Massalowska's footsteps on the polished oak boards. Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes passed ; then Roman rose quickly to his feet, and came towards her, still holding the papers in his hand.

"Biruta," he said, looking at her almost with awe, "you are a wonderful woman. Do you know what you have done?"

"What have I done?"

"You have done that which ten men in ten years might have failed to do; you have obtained possession of the whole secret disposition of the entire organization of the troops in Russian Poland for the contingency of a campaign against either Germany or Austria—the mobilization plan, into whose mysteries probably scarce half a dozen men in all Russia are initiated. Never in my wildest moments could I have dreamed of such success—of such a lucky, such a wonderful chance!"

"Fortune belongs to the bold," said Biruta, throwing back her head with a gesture resembling a war-horse scenting the cannon-smoke. "Did I not tell you so before? And you actually wanted to draw back—to throw up the mission! Acknowledge that you would have been a coward to do so."

"I acknowledge you to be a magician—a witch!" he cried, seizing hold of her hand and kissing it passionately. "I thought myself clever before, but I am a blundering apprentice compared to you. All that I have done as yet is mere child's-play. A few plans drawn from memory, some statistics collected at random, some photographic views of noteworthy points—that is all I have been able to obtain in three months. They will come in usefully, no doubt, for completing and illustrating the situation. But the glory is yours, Biruta. Your booty is by far the more valuable of the two."

"And where are these plans—these photographs?"

"Some of them are here," he replied, unbuttoning his

coat and taking out a chamois-leather case attached round his neck by means of a ribbon.

"How imprudent, Roman!" she exclaimed, taking it from him. "Do you mean to say that you travel about the country with all these compromising documents on your person? You would have been a lost man if they had happened to search you."

"I do not usually wear them. I only brought them to-day because I had intended to verify some of the points in returning home by the river. The rest of my papers are at Stara-Wola."

"You will have no more time for verifying points," said Biruta, taking out the papers and restoring to Roman the empty leather case. "You have nothing further to do in the country now, but to return to Stara-Wola at once, and pack up as fast as you can."

"And you will keep these papers?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Of course. I shall put them together with the spoil of the general's portfolio."

"But then you will be running a tenfold greater risk than mine has been. You call me imprudent for having a few papers about my person, and yet you are proposing to travel with more than twice that amount! How will you pack them? Where can you conceal them?"

"In Gogo's travelling-kennel, of course. That is how I brought them here," she replied, as if a bear were the most self-evidently appropriate guardian to select for valuable documents. "That is the beauty of having a bear-cub as travelling companion, you see; and, moreover, a cub with such remarkably well-furnished jaws. No one will feel inclined to search beneath his mattress."

"There is a carriage coming down the road!" now exclaimed Roman, who had been looking out of the window.

"So there is," and a look of panic came into her eyes. She snatched up all the papers together, and, running down the gallery, restored them hastily to their hiding-place. When she came back to the window the carriage they had sighted was just turning into the avenue, and could be

clearly distinguished. Countess Massalowska recognized her own conveyance, which had been sent for letters to the neighboring post-station.

"What a fright I got!" she said, turning away from the window with a sigh of relief.

A few minutes later a servant came into the gallery with some letters and a newspaper. Biruta merely looked at the letters and then tossed them aside—they were not important, being mostly bills and messages which had been forwarded from Warsaw; then she took up the newspaper in order to see whether, as was sometimes the case, it contained a time-table of the trains running between Warsaw and Thorn.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, abruptly, when she had unfolded the sheet. It was the evening paper of the previous day. She had turned rather pale, and the terrified look of just now had reappeared on her face. On the second page of the newspaper she had caught sight of the dreaded name of Vassiljef.

"Ah!" said Biruta, a second time, when her eye had glanced down the column, but she said it in a different way and with a different accent, thus making it quite another word; the former ejaculation had expressed terror and despair, while this one seemed to imply hope and triumph.

"We are saved," she said, pointing to the paragraph with her finger. "Time was all we required, and this will give us time."

Roman read as follows under the fashionable intelligence of the day:

"We regret to learn that the well-known commander General Vassiljef had a stroke of apoplexy this forenoon, which seized him in the carriage in front of the governor's palace. We understand that this distinguished officer has not yet recovered consciousness, and that grave doubts are entertained of his recovery."

While he was reading this, Countess Massalowska had taken off her travelling-hat and tossed it on to a neighboring packing-case.

"How lucky it is that I gave orders to have my letters and papers forwarded here!" she said. "I shall not require to start to-day after all, not till to-morrow or next day."

"But why delay?"

"Because there is no reason for such urgent hurry now." Roman looked disturbed.

"You think that, because General Vassiljef is insensible, there is no more danger now?"

"No immediate danger, at all events."

"But he may recover consciousness any hour, any moment."

"Hardly. He has had such attacks before, and his recovery has always been very slow. It is not likely to be quicker this time. I will lay any wager that he has not got his wits about him for some days yet, perhaps even—"

"Even what?"

"He may never be himself again; he may never recover consciousness."

"You think he may die?"

"I hope so."

"Do not say that," said Roman, uneasily.

"Why not? Would not his death be very convenient at this precise moment?" returned Biruta, with a strange smile. So might Judith have looked before entering the tent of Holofernes.

"You frighten me, Biruta!"

"Why should it frighten you to hear things called by their names? I have not killed General Vassiljef, nor am I going to do so—that would be a stupid, bungling sort of action; but I shall be glad if he dies, and his death would only be a very natural link in the chain of events. It is always so in life—the victory of one implies the defeat of another; this is a law of fate that always asserts itself, and if we are to be successful in this undertaking, it can only be at the expense of some one else. And, after all, is it my fault if General Vassiljef had a stroke at that precise moment? if his head was not strong enough to

stand the combination of circumstances yesterday morning?"

"What circumstances? You have not yet told me how it all happened."

"Oh, a very simple combination; merely a rather too excellent breakfast, and a glimpse of my shoulders through a muslin *peignoir*, that is really all. But the two things together were apparently too much for the poor man."

Roman made no direct answer, but he set his teeth together and looked rather black. It was not pleasant to hear that his victory had been obtained by such means. But victory it was all the same, and now there would be no more need for plotting and intrigue; once back over the frontier, a new life would begin for them both. He felt a burning desire to be gone, far away out of reach of this odious Vassiljef, away from his repulsive love and his redoubtable vengeance.

He renewed his attempt to induce Biruta to abide by her original plan of starting that same day, but she was obstinate.

"I have a hundred things yet to do, and I am deadly weary," she said, yawning and changing all at once into the languid, indolent woman that most people believed her to be. "I could have started, of course, had it been necessary—I can always find strength to do what I must; but I confess I am glad of the respite, and of the chance of a good night's sleep before the journey. If I had known this before, I need not have left Warsaw in such a desperate hurry. I had not even time to pack up my skeleton. And though my affairs are practically wound up, and my cousin may arrive any day to take possession, there are many details still to be attended to. Remember that I am probably leaving the country forever."

"I shall have no peace of mind until I know that you are safe over the frontier with those papers."

"Do not be so chicken-hearted, Roman," she said, a little impatiently. "I tell you there is no immediate danger either for yourself or for me; there is nothing to connect you with me in public opinion so far, nor is there

anything to connect me with the loss of the general's papers just yet. Not even Gurko was aware that he was to receive these documents yesterday ; and even had he known of it, there is no proof whatsoever that the portfolio was lost in my house. Correspondence with St. Petersburg may, of course, awaken suspicion by-and-by and put them on the track, but that will not be for some little time to come, and long before that we shall be safe in Germany."

Roman had intended to confide to Biruta the uncomfortable lurking suspicion borne in upon him some days previously, that he was being watched ; but she had called him chicken-hearted just now, and there is nothing a man dreads so much as the possible contempt of a woman he loves. So he kept silence on the subject, and they talked of other matters ; they discussed their plans for the immediate future, and settled everything in methodical fashion. He was to return to Stara-Wola later in the day to pack up and take leave of his brother, and thence start direct for the frontier. Biruta would follow within twenty-four hours, or possibly forty-eight, she could not say for certain. She gave him the address of a hotel at Thorn, the Blue Dragon, where they were to meet again.

CHAPTER XXII.

WATER-LILIES.

"A love that took an early root
And had an early doom."

—HERVEY.

ROMAN had quitted Stara-Wola at daybreak on Thursday morning, to repair to Wodniki before any one was stirring, and he left no message to say when he would return.

Hala was as much surprised as Felicyan when she heard of this sudden departure, but, not unnaturally, concluded that Roman's absence must have some connection with the scene of which she had been witness on the veranda last night. What strengthened this conviction was that Luba's face, usually so transparent to read, had betrayed no surprise on hearing that he was gone. Evidently they must understand each other perfectly, thought Hala, as she watched her sister narrowly, and she felt more than ever disinclined to admit that she had been wrong last night in her quarrel with Felicyan. Certainly she had spoken harshly, violently almost, she admitted to herself, as she recalled the words that had passed. But then, why had Felicyan been so obstinate, so confident in the infallibility of his own superior judgment? He had treated her like a child in refusing to admit that her opinion could be worth anything—that is what had so irritated her, to the point of speaking to her husband as she had never spoken before; yet she was not sorry for her words, at least she thought not. Perhaps she would not say them again if the occasion were renewed, but it was right that Felicyan should be punished for that dogged self-confidence. Yes, she would punish him by not speaking a word to him to-day, or to-morrow either, perhaps. Surely

Luba's secret engagement would soon be made known, and then with what pleasure she would turn the tables on her lord and master!

It was easy for Hala to adhere to her resolution of not speaking to Felicyan that day, for he was absent from morning till evening in the wheat-field, where he had given orders that his dinner should be sent out to him in a basket. They were beginning to bind up the sheaves, and this was an operation he wished personally to superintend, as only the master's eye can gauge correctly the rightful proportion of grain to be assigned to each reaper as remuneration of his labor.

He came back to supper, however, and sat down to the table with his wife as if nothing had occurred between them last night, not seeming to notice how ostentatiously she busied herself with the children, and what laconic answers she gave to his remarks about the harvest. It was not Felicyan's nature to keep up a grudge, and he had now resolved to seek an explanation with Roman, and obtain his authorization to Hala's eyes being opened as to what really was going on.

Luba was not at supper. She had gone about all day in a dreamy fashion, with a strange, puzzled expression in her pretty black eyes, her straight Armenian brows drawn together in a thoughtful frown, as though she were trying to read the answer to some baffling riddle. She had a headache, she said, and could not eat, the day had been so stiflingly hot, and she felt sure of there being thunder in the air; she would just go down to the creek and take a dip in the water before bedtime.

Luba felt much refreshed after her bath, and, dismissing the barefooted girl who had carried the linen, she lingered in the little hut after she had wrung out her long black plaits and bound a towel about her head in order to dry the hair. While bathing she had plucked a large tangle of water-lilies. She liked to feel the touch of the cool white flowers, and to sit idly passing her fingers along their shiny stalks as she pondered over the events of the last twenty-four hours.

Countess Massalowska's visit, and the mysterious message to Roman which had accompanied her recognition of Luba's love, what did it all mean? She had spoken of danger, too; and why had Roman not yet returned from Wodniki? He would not be back this evening, for the last steamer had passed down the river half an hour previously.

At last Luba rose to go, for it had grown late, almost dark; the moon was still partially hidden, and only a subdued starlight made visible the surrounding objects. A large raft was coming down the river now, one of those unwieldy crafts, laden with timber, that were constantly passing by here. Luba, standing in the open doorway of the bathing-hut, had paused to look at the raft, which, in the semi-darkness, resembled a species of Noah's ark guided by coal-black fiends, and bound for the infernal regions—a vision sufficiently uncanny to frighten a stranger, but familiar enough to Luba, who had grown up by the river-side. She did, however, shrink back a little into the doorway as she noticed that the raft was drawing nearer to this bank, and her surprise was considerable on seeing it make direct for the outjutting promontory that formed one side of the creek. This was a quite unusual circumstance in her experience of the Vistula wood-crafts, wont to keep well to the middle of the current. Surprise turned to fear when she saw a man leap ashore and make direct for the bathing-hut.

The raft had already put off again, and was soon hidden behind the trees. With fast-beating heart Luba retired into the hut, hoping that the stranger would pass her by unnoticed. Now she could distinctly hear his quick, short step approaching; she held her breath in fearful suspense; an instant later a shriek of terror had burst from her lips.

A man with blackened face, over which was slouched a tattered felt hat, stood before her. His dress, a coarse smock-coat and linen trousers, was that of a common woodman. Certainly a most disreputable, ominous-looking figure, whom no one would willingly meet alone in the dark, let alone a timid young girl. Curiously enough,

however, the stranger himself started back quite as violently, on becoming aware that the hut had another occupant.

"Luba!" he cried out in the next moment, as a ray of moonlight through the little window fell upon her figure. "Why, what a fright you gave me! I hardly should have known you."

Seen thus in the moonlight, the young girl's appearance had something almost supernatural; the white linen cloth falling upon her shoulders resembled the veil of some priestess of old, and the water-lily sheaf might have been an offering she was preparing to lay on the altar of the river-god.

"You gave me a far greater fright, I am sure, Captain Starowski," replied Luba, still trembling so violently that some of the flowers escaped her grasp and slipped to the ground. "What has happened? and why are you in that dress? You have no notion how dreadful you look."

"It was only a joke," said Roman, trying to laugh; "I wanted to see whether I could frighten Felicyan. I did not think of your being here."

The girl looked at him very earnestly; then she shook her head.

"Why do you try to deceive me? It is not a joke."

Roman saw it was useless to deny.

"You are right. It is not a joke," he replied with sudden gravity.

"Then what is it? Why will you not tell me? Why will you not trust me?" she said eagerly, coming a step nearer to him. She felt a great, burning desire to know her fate at any price, to put to rest once for all those torturing doubts that had been racking her brain ever since Countess Massalowska's visit. Very low she added, "Do you not know that I would do anything to help you—to serve you?" In the next minute she did know her fate, and her doubts were forever at rest.

Roman had caught hold of her hand in a warm, hearty grasp, but its very warmth chilled her to the core.

"I believe you, Luba, and I trust you as though you

were my very own sister. I shall always think of you as my favorite youngest sister, and you—you will not forget your brother when he is gone?"

"When you are gone?" The words were spoken with a gasp that was almost a sob.

"To-morrow I shall be gone."

"But you will come back again?"

"I hardly think so."

"Never again?"

She spoke in a low, choking voice, and had put out one arm to steady herself against the rough wooden planking.

"I fear it will not be possible."

"But why? Why? Why?" she cried out loud, the strength of despair giving back her voice.

"I cannot tell you to-night, my dear little sister, for the secret is not mine to tell," he said, still holding her hand and looking down lovingly into her white, scared face. "But in a few days, in a week at most, you will know everything; Felicyan will tell you and Hala, when I am gone."

"And I can do nothing for you?" she repeated, with a last lingering remnant of hope.

"Nothing, except to call Felicyan and tell him to bring me a change of clothes down here. I must not be seen like this, and no one else must know of this masquerade."

She pulled her hand out of his, and ran up the dark meadow, still holding the water-lilies tightly grasped. They had been dripping wet when she had plucked them, a little while ago—they were dripping still when she reached the house.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PARTING.

"Two stars keep not their motion in one sphere."

—*Henry IV.*

WHEN Felicyan joined his brother in the boat-shed, Roman had already washed his face clean, and divested himself of the coarse smock-coat that had given him such a vagabond appearance.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked, looking from the ragged garments on the ground to Roman's own disturbed countenance.

Now that the traces of charcoal with which he had sought to disguise himself were removed, it could be seen how fearfully pale was his face; the eyes, by contrast, shining with a fevered brilliancy.

"It means danger, Felicyan—it means that the police are on my track. I suspected it before; I am sure of it now."

The story was quickly told, and by the time it was ended the elder brother looked fully more disturbed than the younger, one. Roman had started down the river by a steamer which should have brought him to a station in the neighborhood of Stara-Wola more than two hours since. When scarcely embarked, he became aware of the presence of a very unwelcome passenger, who had apparently come from Warsaw—no other than the same suspicious-looking individual who had already so disagreeably impressed him. What was to be done? A decision was urgent, for it was evident that the man was following him. If he let him follow to Stara-Wola, Roman might be in the hands of the police by nightfall. Clearly there was nothing to be done but to mislead the fellow and put him on a false scent. Hardly had he reached this conclu-

sion when the steward began coming round to distribute tickets to those passengers who had got in at the previous station. Roman strolled across the deck with assumed carelessness in the direction of the obnoxious individual, taking care to place himself well within earshot. He went on smoking his cigarette till the steward approached, and then, in answer to the question of where he wished to get out, had named Ciechocinek, a station close to the German frontier and fully two hours below Stara-Wola. He had paced the deck for some time after this, still smoking cigarettes, keeping himself well in view of all the passengers. Once he had stopped, and, apparently overcome by the heat, had taken off his dust-cloak, which was of a light pattern, easily recognizable, and laid it down on a bench straight opposite the presumed detective. Roman felt sure that none of his actions had been overlooked, though the man had been ostensibly absorbed in the perusal of the newspaper he held before his face. Not long after this the spy had risen and gone down below to the cabin. It was already beginning to grow dusk, and Roman, seeing his opportunity, had managed to slip out at the next station, which unfortunately, however, lay on the right bank of the Vistula. His plan had been to walk down to the river-side, trusting to the hope of finding a ferry to take him across, and he did so for more than an hour. Then by good luck he had sighted a timber-raft coming by, and had signalled it from the shore. Not without difficulty had the raftsmen been persuaded to accept him as passenger, and Roman had been obliged to pay handsomely before they consented to put ashore and take him up. A further gift of ten roubles—the very last in his purse—had induced one of the woodmen to exchange his own ragged clothing for Roman's unimpeachable Berlin suit.

The spy—if Roman's calculations were correct—would not discover his absence till Ciechocinek, late at night, perhaps not even then, and would probably spend next day searching the town and its neighborhood for him.

How and by what means suspicion had been awakened Roman was at a loss to conjecture. That this spy could

have no connection with the theft of General Vassiljef's portfolio was evident; for independently of the fact that the general, lying dangerously ill, perhaps on the point of death, was unable to give the alarm, it had been fully a week ago that Roman had felt himself watched and followed. The whole matter was very mysterious, the only thing clear being that they were now threatened by two dangers totally distinct from each other—one to Biruta, the other to himself. He now regretted that he had not more strongly urged upon her the expediency of starting at once.

The two brothers sat together on the veranda late into the summer night, long after the household had retired to rest, not talking very much, but each busied with his own thoughts; for we are never more silent than when we have much to say.

It was their very last evening together, they both felt, for Roman would never be able to set foot again on Russian territory. He was conscious of this with a sharp pain-prick as he realized that he was probably looking at this view for the very last time. He did not love Stara-Wola as Felicyan loved it. It had not wound itself round his heart nor crept into his life as into that of the elder brother; yet now that he was to see it no more, he experienced a soft regret, an unconscious shade of pity, for himself, perhaps, because he was leaving something which he had never been able to appreciate.

Looking down at the calm flowing river silvered by moonlight streaks, at the sleeping landscape beyond, it almost seemed to him for a moment as though he could have spent his life here in the same way Felicyan was doing. But this mood was transitory; in the next minute he smiled at his own folly, as he tossed away an unfinished cigarette into the grass, where it shone for an instant like a gigantic glow-worm, then died away into blackness.

No, not for him were the simple rural joys, the modest excitements, that bounded Felicyan's limited horizon; there was no point of resemblance between the two brothers; and

now their ways, which for a time had run parallel, were going to diverge, and each would be happy henceforth in his own very different fashion—Roman in the achieved triumphs of successful ambition, and the intoxicating possession of a brilliant and fascinating woman who loved him; Felicyan in his limited round of agricultural duties, his sleek cows, thriving turnips, and his homely, countrified wife. Roman cared nothing for cows or turnips, nor could he have been happy with a countrified wife. His mate must be an eagle, not a placid domestic pigeon; and Biruta was an eagle who feared nothing, and could look at the sun unabashed. With such a woman by his side, no dream of ambition seemed unattainable; their life would be a long triumphant pageant. Yet Felicyan too would be happy, in his own inferior, grovelling fashion, thought Roman, with that sort of loving contempt which always tinged his feeling towards his brother. His life would flow on to its close as easily and placidly as the current of yonder river, with no great excitements, no strong emotions of either grief or joy, to mark its course. Felicyan was not made for violent sensations, Roman knew. Had he not been fully more upset than Roman himself on hearing of his brother's danger this afternoon?—so anxious, so troubled, that Roman had not dared to confide to him the further and far more serious complication regarding General Vassiljev's portfolio.

And Felicyan, of what were his thoughts, as he sat still, mechanically holding the long-extinct pipe in his hand? Was he thinking, perhaps, of the promise made to his dying father twenty-three years ago, that he would take his place towards the little orphan step-brother? And was he wondering whether he had faithfully kept his word? Had he indeed always acted for Roman's greater good and happiness? He had done his best according to his lights, of that he felt sure; but had he not perhaps been mistaken in some of his decisions? Would he ever have given his consent to this military career if he had guessed all that the service might entail? If military distinction were only to be obtained at price of the feverish anxieties,

the protracted state of restless trepidation of the past weeks and months, was it worth attaining at all?

Perhaps Felicyan did not actually think all this, nor was he able to fashion out his thoughts distinctly, even to himself. He was not clever, not good at an argument, nor were his opinions the result of any intellectual process; they were merely instinctive, innate, constitutional I might almost say. He had inherited them from his forefathers along with his broad shoulders and iron muscles. In appearance Felicyan might be a farmer, a simple tiller of the land; he might wear an old fustian coat and a pair of abominably ugly boots, but nothing could alter the fact that the blood of a dozen generations of noble ancestors flowed in his veins. His simple, straightforward instinct, untutored and untainted by contact with the world, had made him feel dimly conscious that the work his brother was doing was not such as befitted a Starowolski whose ancestors had gained their laurels on open battle-fields. It was not clean, not gentlemanly work, in fact, he might have said, had he been able to put his thoughts into so many plain words.

But, as Roman had said, Felicyan knew nothing about modern warfare, and the means it is obliged to employ. How should he be aware that sovereigns are not to be judged by the same standard as ordinary mortals?—that emperors have their own code of honor, which differs materially from the code established among simple gentlemen?—and that, consequently, a perfectly honorable man may act in a perfectly dishonorable fashion, if the interests of his party require him to do so; and that, wearing an imperial uniform, he may, in the service of his monarch, do things which might otherwise procure for him such epithets as knave and blackleg?

It is not consistent with a gentleman's honor to look into his adversary's cards at play; but an emperor need have no scruple (and he has none) in peeping into his brother emperor's hand if he gets the chance.

All this, however, Felicyan did not understand, because, as I have said already, he was not clever by nature, and

had lacked the opportunity of forming his ideas from contact with the civilized world.

Along with this dim, undefined disapproval of Roman's career, there was in Felicyan's mind to-night the pain of losing his brother, for he felt that he was losing him irrevocably—losing all that remained of the little fair-haired boy who had once been all in all to him. Roman would go to-morrow morning early, and would return no more. From a distance he would hear of his triumphs, his successes, and would rejoice over them of course; but yet it would not be the same thing as formerly—not at all the same thing. A chapter in their life would be closed which might never again be reopened.

And what was perhaps the most painful thought, amid the many painful thoughts that were crowding upon him to-night, was to realize that his brother's departure would be a relief—not only relief on Roman's account, to know that he was in safety, but relief to himself as well, to the whole domestic life of Stara-Wola. They would be able at last to shake themselves free of this atmosphere of mystery and misunderstanding so foreign to all their natures. He need have no more secrets from Hala, and Luba would be liable to no more false impressions. No serious harm had been done as yet. It was only that their life had lately got a little out of focus, as it were; but after Roman's departure things would soon get back again into the old groove.

Felicyan knocked the cold gray ashes out of his pipe. It was past midnight; the moon had already gone down behind the trees, and the grasshoppers' voices long since died out into silence. It was getting cool, almost chill, out here on the veranda.

"I must go and pack up so as to have nothing more to do in the morning," said Roman, rising. "And then I shall try to get a few hours' sleep.

Felicyan accompanied his brother, and stood by while everything was being put into the travelling-valise.

"I shall not take back my photographic apparatus, after all," said Roman, suddenly taking it out of the valise where

he had already packed it. "Safer not, in case my box is searched at the frontier. You may keep it, Felciu, for photographing your cows."

"Thanks, but I should hardly know how to use it," said Felicyan, turning over the case rather awkwardly between his hands.

"Then give it to Luba or the children. Now, I am quite ready. Oh, by the way, Felicyan, can you lend me some money for the journey? I had to give away my last paper rouble on the raft, and have only circular notes remaining, which cannot be cashed except at Warsaw."

"How much do you require?"

"Well, I must have a couple of hundred roubles at least. It would not do to incur the risk of running short, as one never can tell what may happen. What a fix I should have been in this evening if my purse had chanced to be empty!"

"Two hundred roubles! Why, I doubt if there are much more than twenty in the house at this moment."

"Do you mean to say that you have got no ready money?"

"I rarely have at this time of the year. I do not require money, as nearly everything comes from the land, and the laborers are paid in grain. When the harvest is over and I have sold some corn, I shall be in funds again."

"Then what on earth am I to do?" cried Roman, in great excitement. "I cannot possibly get away without money, and I must not delay a day, an hour longer, if I can help it; I must be off by the first morning train. Is there no money to be raised in the village?"

"Hardly; and it would not be prudent either, if you think that some one there has been watching you. But I can drive into town the first thing to-morrow and get money from the bank; they know me well, and will give me credit. I can be back soon after ten o'clock."

"Not before?"

"Scarcely; the bank does not open till half-past eight."

"Well, I suppose that must do," said Roman, with an impatient sigh. "Come, let us go to bed."

CHAPTER XXIV.

PAUL ET VIRGINIE.

“The prudent man looketh well to his going.”

—*Proverbs* xiv. 15.

BUT Roman was not able to fall asleep at once. He tossed restlessly from side to side, while all the events of this very eventful day flitted through his brain in revolving succession. The interview with Biruta at Wodniki, the contents of General Vassiljev's portfolio, the steamboat and his tremors on recognizing the spy among the passengers, the raft, and the meeting with Luba in the boat-ing-shed, then back again to Wodniki and Biruta. What a wonderful woman she was, to be sure! What determination! What intelligence! A woman fit to govern an empire! How she had foreseen each difficulty, provided for every contingency! How cleverly she had concealed those papers in that rent in the damask hangings! He never would have hit upon such an ingenious device; and simultaneously with this reflection it occurred to Roman that despite this afternoon's fright on the steamer he had been less cautious than Biruta by far. He had not even thought of temporarily concealing those remaining plans and photographs, not very numerous to be sure, but any one of which would be sufficient to compromise him if found in his possession. He struck a light and looked about him; there stood the valise ready packed for travelling, and on a chair near the bed lay the chamois-leather case in which the papers were folded away. Why had he left the case lying out here, plainly visible to whoever entered the room? It was not prudent he now recognized. Suppose some one should come? Suppose that detective (for it was a detective he felt sure) should already have tracked him back to

Stara-Wola? Suppose the house should be searched this very night? What then? The plans would have been discovered, and he would be lost, his government compromised. How was it possible that he had overlooked this contingency? Yes; he had been right in saying that he was but a bungling apprentice compared to Biruta—Biruta would never have run such a risk. The whole castle at Wodniki might have been searched without General Vassiljef's papers being found. How safely they were hidden away in that hole in the faded damask behind the old painting.

Roman got out of bed, and, taking up the candle, began to inspect the walls of his room with a view to concealing the papers until it was time to start. He moved with the blind automatic motion of a sleep-walker, almost as though he were obeying some unseen influence that compelled him from afar. He seemed to hear Biruta's voice accusing him of imprudence, and bidding him hide those papers as she had done; yes, he would hide them; and not till the very last moment, when the carriage was at the door and the money in his pocket, would he conceal the papers about his person. It would not take two minutes to do, and in the meantime it was better to be on the safe side. No, there was no possibility of concealing them here in the bedroom, he saw at a glance, for the walls were bare, and the windows curtainless. It was much easier to hide things in an old castle, luxuriously fitted up, than in a simple country-house. He opened the door into the adjoining red saloon, and, holding the candle in front of him, peered in; there was no damask-hung walls nor old paintings here either, of course, but there were the framed engravings and the two large mirrors between the windows. He went up to the first one, but involuntarily started back, alarmed at sight of his own reflection. It was the thin looking-glass, whose unequal surface had the effect of lengthening his already pale, affrighted face into the semblance of a ghastly spectre. Provoked at his own nervousness, Roman put down the candle and tried with both hands to move the mirror; this would be a good

place to hide the papers, he thought. But the mirror, like its companion, was screwed tightly to the wall, and resisted all his efforts. No, this would not do; but there were the pictures; they at least would not be screwed to the wall, and their clumsy gilt wooden frames were roomy enough to accommodate whole reams of paper.

He took one picture down from the rusty nail on which it hung, without much difficulty tearing through a layer of filmy cobwebs that bound it to the wall. A score of drowsy flies, which had been peacefully slumbering on the frame, flew off affrighted, most likely under the impression that old Nicorowicz, their deadly foe, was abroad on a nocturnal hunt.

Roman carried the picture to the table where he had set down the candle, and examined it carefully. It was one of the old-fashioned tinted French prints, a scene from Paul and Virginia, in which the lover is represented as carrying his mistress across a brook of running water. Even in the midst of his preoccupation he could not help smiling at the perfectly impossible attitude of the two figures, and the admirable ease with which the lanky Paul is apparently lifting the exceedingly plump Virginia by two fingers only. The glass which covered this work of art was cracked at one place, and blotched all over with fly-stains. He turned the picture round, and saw that it was secured in its tarnished gold frame by a thin worm-eaten board, which fitted but loosely to the back of the engraving; two rusty nails, quickly removed, showed that there was here plenty of space to stow away all the plans and photographs if folded out flat. It did not take him five minutes to do so, and then the board fitted in quite neatly on the top, not even requiring the former tacks to secure it.

Roman felt much relieved in mind when he had restored Paul and Virginia to their place on the wall. He stood for a moment surveying his work critically, and felt satisfied with himself. Even a Russian police inspector would hardly think of seeking papers inside the frame of an old engraving.

It was still night when he returned to his room, but a faint streak of pale gray on the horizon told that the early summer dawn was not far off. Roman threw himself on his bed and slept profoundly till long after daybreak.

CHAPTER XXV.

RABOWSKI'S BREAKFAST AND RABOWSKI'S DINNER.

"Feed me with food convenient for me."

—*Proverbs xxx. 8.*

WHEN Roman opened his eyes it was broad daylight, past eight o'clock, as his watch informed him. He felt strengthened and refreshed, and could afford to smile at his nervous terrors of the preceding night. Still it could do no harm to leave the papers where they were till it was time to start.

While Roman was dressing, he heard a carriage drive up, and through the open window every word of the following dialogue was distinctly audible.

"Your servant, Pani Hala," said a half-cracked voice; "I have just stepped in to breakfast with you this morning, and to ask you to give my horses a feed of oats; I could not bear to pass your gate without entering—I could not indeed."

"You are very kind, I am sure," came Hala's answer, in rather constrained tones.

"Kind! Do not mention it. I should willingly have stayed for dinner as well, only that I am bound for Litwinow to visit my friend Ujeski, whose feast-day it is. Another time I shall be delighted, I am sure, delighted. But to-day I shall have only time to break my fast with a crust of bread."

"Tea or coffee?" asked the hostess.

"Coffee," returned the cracked voice, whose owner was perfectly well aware that tea was the usual morning beverage at Stara-Wola. "Your coffee is too good to be refused, and as for the rest, pray do not trouble yourself on my account. You know Rabowski's simple habits,

and how easily he is satisfied. A couple of plain-boiled eggs, a mouthful of your excellent home-cured ham, and a few cheese *pirogi* are really all I require—quite sufficient, I assure you. Pray do not be so unkind as to strangle for my benefit one of those promising young ducklings I observed in driving up; they certainly look remarkably plump and tender, and must be excellent served with haricot beans.”

Roman hastily finished dressing, and, going out into the passage, met Hala returning from the kitchen.

“Where is Felicyan?”

“Gone more than an hour ago,” she answered, with a little temper; “but where or why is more than I can say. He did not even think necessary to mention the fact; and who should drop into breakfast but that odious Rabowski? I have just been to the kitchen to see about the bill of fare he so obligingly made out for himself.”

Roman also was provoked at the untoward visit. It was not pleasant to have a stranger witness of his farewells at Stara-Wola. His presence, too, might be inconvenient, if he chanced to be in the room when the picture containing the papers had to be taken down.

The unwelcome guest, accompanied by Luba, now appeared in the doorway coming from the garden outside; the young girl looked pale, her dark eyes were all in shadow to-day, and she listened but absently to her companion’s garrulous chatter. Rabowski came in with a jaunty air, carrying a large green melon in both hands. He was delighted to see Roman, of course, and kissed him affectionately on both cheeks, without, however, relaxing his grasp of the melon.

“See what I have found?” he said gayly, apostrophizing the hostess, and holding up the fruit in triumph. “A perfectly ripe melon, a most beautiful specimen. I have not tasted one this year.”

“Neither have we,” returned Madame Starowolski, shortly.

“Now, really, you don’t say so? And so you have waited for old Rabowski to come and gather it for you.

Quite right, quite right. It will taste all the sweeter for being shared in such delightful company."

This with an insinuating bow to the ladies, which seemed to convey the impression that he as host was doing the honors of the melon, graciously inviting the others to partake of it.

"I don't think it can be ripe yet," said Hala, who was regarding her precious melon with an agonized expression, not unlike that of a timorous mother who beholds her tender infant in a barbarian grasp. "If I had known it was ripe I would have served it to Countess Massalowska the day before yesterday."

"Ah, Countess Massalowska; I did not know that you were acquainted."

"Yes," said Madame Starowolska, complacently; "the countess was anxious to make my acquaintance, it seems; and it is only natural after all, seeing that we are such near neighbors. I shall return her visit with Felicyan next week, as soon as the wheat has been got in and the horses can be spared."

Rabowski looked pensive.

"I am sorry that I have not yet been able to obtain an introduction to Wodniki," he said, regretfully; "I hear that the countess lives in very great style. Her late husband, Count Massalowski, was a celebrated epicure. I think I must ask Felicyan to present me. I always like to know the friends of my friends. *Les amis de mes amis sont mes amis*, you know."

"Felicyan was not at home when the countess called," said Madame Starowolska, coldly, "so of course he cannot present a stranger."

"Ah, a pity! But Captain Starowolski will perhaps be so kind?" with an inquiring glance at the young officer.

Luba also glanced stealthily at Roman. His head averted, he was nervously twisting the end of his moustache between two fingers, and did not answer.

"My brother-in-law is just returning to Germany, and does not know the countess either," said Hala, replying for him, and delighted to be able to administer this addi-

tional snub to the unfortunate Rabowski, who followed her in silence to the dining-room, dejectedly stroking the rugged melon-rind with one finger.

Breakfast was a tedious and uncomfortable meal. Neither Luba nor Roman made any attempt to talk; Hala was evidently out of sorts, out of temper with herself and with every one else; and old Nicorowicz, after having spilled the greater part of his tea on the table-cloth, for which he was rebuked by an ominous frown on the part of his eldest daughter, had wandered away to his flies. Rabowski alone, smiling and self-confident as ever, and serenely unconscious that he was not conferring a favor by his presence, chattered away unabashed, and asked in turn for half a dozen delicacies that were not upon the table, each one of which involved a visit to the store-room or the cellar.

After having consumed three large slices of melon, he made the discovery that Madame Starowolska had perhaps been right after all in saying that it was scarcely ripe. Unripe melon is apt to lie heavily on the stomach, but that evil could easily be remedied by a glass (or two) of Felicyan's first-rate corn brandy. Unfortunately the key of the wine-cellar was in Felicyan's pocket, as Hala explained; but the obliging Rabowski declared himself perfectly willing to await his return. He could not think of going away without having wished good-morning to his dear friend Felicyan.

So they all sat down again in a rather formal circle in the big saloon, having nothing particular to say to each other. Hala was wearily speculating as to the chances of getting rid of this troublesome guest; Rabowski was hoping that Felicyan would soon appear with the cellar-key; Luba was mournfully counting the minutes that yet remained before she would have to bid farewell to Roman; and Roman himself was dividing his agitated attention between his watch and that old French print on the wall.

He had never particularly noticed it before, during all the weeks he had spent at Stara-Wola, but now it seemed

to have grown suddenly conspicuous; the plump Virginia was looking out of the frame at him with round, affrighted eyes, perhaps because she felt her position on her lover's arm to be so very insecure; and Paul, was not his arm trembling as he held her up? Roman wondered that the others did not see it as he did. It was intolerable to remain in the room along with that picture, from which he could not look away. He had always scoffed at thought-reading before, but just now he felt that there might be something in it after all. He would not have cared to put himself into the hands of a clairvoyant here in this room.

Roman got up, proposing to smoke a cigar outside, and Rabowski got up with him. He had no objection to testing the quality of Captain Starowski's cigarettes; they might just take a turn on the road by which Felicyan was to arrive. It was not far from ten o'clock now, and he might be expected to appear at any moment.

The road, thickly coated in powdery dust, stretched away like a pearl-gray ribbon to either side. Every blade of grass, each little flower that grew near the road, was powdered gray, and before he had taken half a dozen steps, Roman's shining leather boots were powdered gray as well. There was not a breath of air stirring to disturb the thick-lying dust; but whenever a cart came by it raised a cloud of dust which hung about the air long after the vehicle had passed out of sight.

"Here he comes at last," cried Rabowski, as another dust-cloud, higher and denser than any that had yet appeared, heralded the approach of a new cart or carriage.

It must be Felicyan; but he certainly was raising an extraordinary amount of dust, and was driving in a fast and furious manner, very unlike his usual calm pace. Felicyan was not fond of over-tiring his horses, especially in such hot weather.

They both looked eagerly in the direction of the approaching cart; but the sun shining straight in their eyes made it difficult to distinguish details for some minutes, or it might have been moments only, Roman thought af-

terwards. Presently from out the dust-cloud two large white butterflies seemed to detach themselves and to come running towards him with a rapid fluttering motion, and the cloud, too, was not unbroken pearly gray, as those other clouds had been, but all alight with a strange glitter that resembled the shine of polished glass. Then the fluttering butterflies resolved themselves into the tossing heads of two white horses, whiter even to-day than nature had made them, while the undefined glitter took shape before his eyes.

It was a shape which sent his blood rushing back to the heart with a violence that was almost pain, for even before Roman had identified the dusty white figure in the cart beside the driver, he had realized that those glittering points were steel bayonets.

We are told that persons in imminent danger of death have often seen their whole past life unrolled before them as in a panorama; that the mind, preternaturally sharpened and raised out of its normal state, is enabled in a single moment to grasp the collective experiences and sensations of a long lapse of years. Something of the same kind of mental activity came to Roman now, as he recognized the detective who had come to arrest him, followed by half a dozen armed and mounted Cossacks. Before even they had reached him, he had realized his position in all its bearings, and accurately calculated the probable consequences of this event. He must submit quietly, he knew; there was nothing else to be done. He would be searched, of course; but as no incriminating matter would be found on his person, no ultimate harm could possibly come to him; the Russian government would not dare to use violence towards a German officer, and how lucky it was that he had concealed those papers last night behind the picture. But for Biruta there was danger, great danger. She was still a Russian subject by law, and the theft of General Vassiljev's portfolio was a terribly serious matter—a matter of life and death, perhaps. She must be warned at any price.

These thoughts had passed through his mind with the

rapidity of lightning, and simultaneously with the question of how Biruta was to be warned, the answer suggested itself. He turned to his companion.

"Go at once to Wodniki and tell Countess Massalowska to lose no time in joining the Blue Dragon."

"But I do not know the countess—neither do you, I thought; and what on earth does the Blue Dragon mean?" exclaimed the much-bewildered Rabowski.

"Never mind that, but do as I tell you. You will be well received."

"But I was going to dine at Litwinow to-day. It is Ujeski's feast-day, and he would be so disap—"

"You will dine at Wodniki."

"But how can I?" Rabowski was beginning.

The cart was very close to them by this time.

"You can, you must!" urged Roman in a rapid undertone; "and, above all, keep silence to every one, as you value my head—or—or your dinner," he concluded, after casting about for a sufficiently potent climax; "you may save my life, and Countess Massalowska has got a French cook."

There was no time for more; the cart had reached the place where they were standing, and the driver, at a sign from his companion, had abruptly pulled up his snorting horses. The mounted Cossacks had halted too, and the man in the cart began slowly to descend.

CHAPTER XXVI.

LORELEY.

"Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances."

—*Othello*.

DANGER never comes to us from the side we expect, or it would not be danger at all; for then we should be on our guard and able to avert it. So, in this case, the danger which for the past week had been hovering over Roman Starowolski, to culminate just now in his arrest, had nothing whatsoever to do with the loss of General Vassiljef's portfolio; for the general, still hovering between life and death, had been as yet unable to give any account of the matter. Thus having, by a chance so rare as to be almost incredible, escaped the consequences of Biruta's audacity, suspicion had been directed to Roman from a totally different quarter; the terrible general who had been robbed of his portfolio was for the present harmless, while, on the other hand, a harmless quadruped had been the means of bringing terrible trouble upon its master. In order to make clear how this had come to pass, it will be necessary to go back a little way in this narrative.

It was an unusually hot summer at Berlin this year, and every one not bound down by business, military, or diplomatic duties, to the baked bricks and stifling dust of the city, had fled to seek refreshment of body and solace of mind amid green fields and pastures cool. Those who were forced to remain behind groaned exceedingly, and felt their lot to be a very hard one.

Colonel Bakounine, the Russian military *attaché* at Berlin, was in this unhappy position, and was feeling it acutely; for he had no prospect of getting away till the beginning of the autumn manœuvres, to which he expected an invitation (for these international civilities are never

more punctiliously adhered to than between two nations which have begun to distrust each other). Scarcely any of Colonel Bakounine's acquaintances remained in town, and there was nothing going on at the theatres; besides, even had there been, who could have possibly cared to frequent the theatre when the thermometer stood 95° in the shade?

The only endurable moments in the day were those spent on horseback in the Thiergarten. Colonel Bakounine was an early riser, as well as a great lover of horses, and his daily presence in the German Hyde Park from March to November had become such an established feature that the very sparrows must have known by sight the tall, hard-featured man, with the hawk-like eye and the wildcat smile. The other habitual riders knew him by sight, of course, and he knew them, too; knew the qualities of each steed and the proficiency of each rider he passed on the broad sandy alley; for Colonel Bakounine was gifted with a keen vision and an excellent memory both for man and beast, and never forgot a horse or a face once seen.

If there is truth in the saying that the world is not so very large after all, since the self-same figures are always crossing and recrossing our path, it is yet more self-evident that every large town is in reality but a small village, in so far as the rotation of social life is concerned. Every actor on the scene, however insignificant his part, becomes conspicuous by absence; so it was but natural that Colonel Bakounine should miss the presence of several habitual riders in the Thiergarten this summer.

What had, for instance, become of that fat Jewish banker with a figure like a beer-barrel and a seat like a sack of flour, who used to pant up and down the avenue on a horse as ponderous, but of far more ancient lineage, than himself?

Dead, he was told; killed by gout and over-prosperity—suffocated in his own gold.

And that notoriously handsome actress, in the showy habit braided *à la* hussar, whose courage equalled her im-

pudence, and who never was seen otherwise than surrounded by several members of the *jeunesse dorée* of the capital?

She had accepted an engagement at some other theatre, and had gone to pursue her fortunes elsewhere.

And where was now that slim young officer whom he used to meet almost daily on a fiery chestnut mare, near to the entrance of the grand avenue?

It was the horse that had first directed Colonel Bakounine's attention to Roman Starowolski more than a year ago, and then he had been struck by the graceful seat of the rider, and the ease displayed in managing the skittish, hot-blooded chestnut; subsequently he had learned his name, and also his nickname—for Roman was known in Berlin by the sobriquet of the Handsome Pole. Since then the two riders had frequently met, and nearly always at the same place—for Captain Starowolski was usually beginning his morning ride just as Colonel Bakounine was turning homeward; then they had come together once or twice in the *salon* of some mutual acquaintance. Colonel Bakounine had alluded to their daily meetings, saying a few civil words in praise of the chestnut mare, and giving to understand that, should Captain Starowolski be inclined to part with her, he, the colonel, would be happy to be her purchaser.

Roman had no idea of parting with Loreley, his favorite horse, as he named a price so exorbitant as to destroy Bakounine's appetite for the bargain. Their acquaintance remained a slight one, and intercourse was mostly confined to a coldly courteous exchange of bows when they passed each other in the Thiergarten.

The colonel's attachment to the beautiful Loreley was not, however, extinct; and when the object of his admiration had been missing from the scene of action for a considerable time, his curiosity was somewhat exercised to know what had become of Captain Starowolski and his chestnut mare. He must have been transferred from Berlin, he supposed, to some provincial garrison, for he did not recollect having seen him since the beginning or middle of April.

One day, however, towards the end of May, when the

horse-chestnut trees were in full blossom, Colonel Bakounine saw Loreley again; but her master, the handsome Pole, was not riding her this time. She was led by a groom in the undress uniform of a soldier servant, who, mounted on a very inferior brown animal, seemed to have some difficulty in restraining the nervous chestnut.

So Captain Starowolski had not left Berlin for good, mused the colonel; or had he, after all, parted with the mare to some luckier fellow, some brother officer, who had paid down the price which he had refused? And as a thing always gains in value in exact proportion as it becomes unattainable, Colonel Bakounine almost felt just now as if he could have paid the sum which had seemed to him so exorbitantly high a little while ago. He was in want of a showy charger on which to appear at the autumn manoeuvres, and this one would just have suited the purpose. Why had he not thought of asking the groom the name of the man who had bought the mare? It was too late now to turn back, and, besides, he did not wish to appear too anxious on the subject. But he resolved to put the question the very next time he met the groom.

The next time did not come for a whole fortnight. It was June, and the horse-chestnut trees had long since shed their blossoms before the colonel again came across the object of his secret hankering.

"Whose horses are these, my friend?" he asked, reining up his steed alongside of the chestnut.

The groom, a thick-pated Suabian boor, saluted awkwardly.

"They belong to my master."

"And your master's name?"

"Captain Starowolski."

The Russian gave a sigh of relief.

"Then, what is the matter with your master? Is he ill?"

No, he was not ill, it appeared. Leastwise the groom did not seem to think so.

"But surely you must know whether he is ill or not?" said the colonel, impatiently.

"I never heard tell that he was sick."

"When did you see him last?"

The groom scratched his head, as though to quicken memory, then proceeded to explain that it might be six weeks, or eight perhaps, he could not say exactly.

"Then he is not here? Has he left Berlin?"

"He is not here."

"Why could not the dolt have said so at once?" reflected Bakounine. Aloud, however, he only said, "And where has he gone to?"

This question also proved to be too much for the boor's intelligence. He had not the slightest notion of his master's whereabouts nor of when he was likely to return.

So the colonel had to content himself with noting down number and name of the street where Captain Starowolski lived. He would call at the house some day and obtain the address. Perhaps he would write and renew his offer for the mare.

He did call there within the week, and from the concierge obtained the information he desired. Captain Starowolski had left before Easter, and had given to understand that he might be absent for a considerable time, all the summer, perhaps. At least so the concierge had gathered. All letters and papers were to be forwarded to him, care of his brother, Felicyan Starowolski, residing at Stara-Wola, in the government of Plock, in Russian Poland.

Colonel Bakounine entered the address in his pocket-book, and walked home plunged in deep thought.

Next day he sat down and wrote a letter, which, however, bore no reference to the chestnut mare, nor was addressed to Captain Starowolski. It was written to a person occupying a high military post at St. Petersburg, and contained the following passage:

"It may be as well to call your attention to a certain Captain Starowolski, a Pole by birth, but serving in the German Staff Corps, who has been absent from Berlin since the beginning of April, ostensibly on a visit to his brother, Felicyan Starowolski, of Stara-Wola, in the government of Plock.

"Such prolonged leave of absence at this time of the

year is an unusual circumstance, the more so in this particular case, as from inquiries I have taken care to make, Captain Starowolski has the reputation of being an exceedingly efficient and promising officer. It can, therefore, only be supposed that very urgent reasons, either of private or public nature, have determined this extended leave. If the former, you will no doubt be able to ascertain them without difficulty from the country people about Stara-Wola ; but if you can discover no plausible ground for this prolonged stay in Russia, all the more reason to keep a sharp eye upon him, and find out what he is after.

"From many signs and indications I gather that the German government is disposed to mistrust us. What so likely, therefore, that they are sending spies across the frontier in order to take our measure? And, if such be the case, what spy so efficient as a Pole? My suspicions may be groundless; but it is well to be wide-awake in these troubled times, and the matter is worth looking into."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CITADEL.

"Now . . . are you prisoner to an emperor."

—*Titus Andronicus.*

ROMAN was escorted to Warsaw and conducted to the state prison, the Citadel, where a minute examination of his person and of the contents of his valise took place. He had not been able to exchange parting words with his sister-in-law or Luba ; but his request with regard to the valise was granted, for, being not wholly ignorant of what he had to expect inside a Russian prison, he was appalled at the notion of being left for days, for weeks perhaps, without even a change of linen.

In presence of two officials, Roman was made to strip to the skin, his watch and purse were taken away, and his small remaining stock of money was counted. His stockings were held up to the light, and even the patent leather boots submitted to a careful scrutiny, their lining ripped up and examined, to see whether no bank-notes or other papers had been hidden there. At last, after a fruitless search, he was permitted to resume his clothes and conducted to his cell, a large, dreary, brick-paved room, with two grated windows, very far removed from the ground, one of which was partially boarded up with some rotten planks. It was beginning to grow dark when Roman was ushered in here, and the small amount of light that could find its way through the one uncovered window scarcely enabled him to identify the objects in the room.

There was not much to be seen. A low iron bedstead, covered with a blanket of exceedingly doubtful appearance, and a broken chair, were the sum total of the furniture.

He heard the key turn in the lock of the door outside, and a heavy iron bar restored to its place with a harsh,

grating sound, and then he realized that he was in truth a prisoner, cut off from communication with all his friends, from Felicyan, from Biruta.

He sat down on the low pallet-bed plunged in painful reflections ; where was Biruta now ? Had the warning reached her in time to enable her to make her escape ? or was she herself in the hands of jailers ? Locked up, perhaps, in a cell resembling this one—the very thought was madness ! For himself he had little anxiety, provided only she were safe. No proof could possibly be brought home to him, and he was prepared to deny everything laid to his charge. Sooner or later they would have to set him free again, he supposed. A German officer could not be detained indefinitely ; the delay would be inexpressibly wearisome, to be sure, but it need not have any fatal consequences. At the moment of his arrest he had bewailed the unlucky chance that had caused his stock of ready money to run short. But for that circumstance Felicyan need not have driven into town, and the delay would never have occurred. Roman could have got away from Stara-Wola fully three hours sooner, and might possibly have escaped unmolested over the frontier.

Possibly—ay—but not certainly—and as this view of the case occurred to him, he began to ask himself whether, after all, the delay had not been providential ? Had he been seized after he had quitted Stara-Wola, with those papers concealed upon him, the matter would have looked a great deal uglier both for himself and for the German government. It was a comfort now to think of those papers, so securely hidden away behind Paul and Virginia. How lucky that he had thought of this hiding-place ! Yes, he now recognized that, provided Biruta were in safety, things were not so very bad after all. At least they might have been infinitely worse.

By the time he had reached this conclusion it had grown dark. Every one seemed to have forgotten about him ; apparently no one thought of bringing him a light. The sentry's step along the brick-paved corridor, now nearer, now farther away, was the only sound that reached his ear.

At last, after a long, a very long time, other steps were heard to approach, and, with much grating and rattling, the bolt was withdrawn. A soldier appeared with a small oil-lamp, which he fixed above the door; then he went out again, and shortly returned with the prisoner's supper, which, in the lack of a table, he put down on the rickety chair. It consisted of a lump of very black bread, and a basin containing some soup or gruel of greasy appearance and acid odor.

Roman tried to swallow a little of the soup, but the compound was so nauseous that, despite considerable hunger, he was forced to abandon the attempt. On asking the soldier whether he could not manage to procure for him some less repulsive species of nourishment, the man had grinned, and given him to understand that, though strictly against orders, he might be induced to do so for a consideration. But Roman was devoid of the means of bribery; his purse had contained but a little small change, and even that had been taken from him, so he had to content himself with the lump of black bread, which, though at once stale and underbaked, yet served to still the worst pangs of hunger.

Sleep was hardly to be thought of in connection with a mattress stuffed with mouldy straw that smelt of mildew, a filthy blanket, and innumerable fleas. He hurled the blanket to the farthest end of the room, but even that did not serve to deliver him from the tiny persecutors, whose name was legion. The greater part of this first night in prison was spent by Roman in walking up and down the brick floor of the cell.

Daybreak was a relief, even though it only served the more clearly to disclose the dreary character of his surroundings. In the course of the forenoon he was summoned before the prison governor—a short, aggressive-looking individual, strongly marked by small-pox; short in stature, and likewise in temper.

Here called upon to give a clear account of himself, and to state how it came that he, a German officer, was making such a prolonged stay in the country, Roman gave

answer that, though by profession a German officer, he was by birth a Pole, and as such had a right to visit his relations. He had come to Stara-Wola for country air and quiet, and to recruit his health, impaired by over-study. On his side he demanded to know by what right he was deprived of his liberty? Of what was he accused?

"Of being a spy sent here to report upon the military resources of the country."

Roman shrugged his shoulders.

"Prove it," was all he said.

The governor began to bluster, for the want of proof was precisely the most irritating part of the matter. He felt convinced that this young man was a spy; he could be nothing else. Yet they had been unable to lay hold of anything that could justify the assertion. The valise had been ransacked from cover to cover, without the smallest scrap of written paper coming to light.

A minute cross-examination now ensued, with no other result but causing the governor to lose his temper. Roman's course of action was a perfectly clear one. As a German officer he could not betray his government, and was in honor bound to deny every charge brought against him. He did deny everything, and, after an hour spent in fruitless interrogation, was escorted back to his cell.

Later in the day the valise was restored to him, and after his unrefreshing night it was some relief to be able to take out a fresh change of linen, and obtain access to such luxuries as soap and razors.

Roman fully expected to see Felicyan before many hours had elapsed. Surely his first impulse on hearing of his brother's arrest would be to hurry to the spot and try to procure for him such relief as he could afford! But the hot July day wore on to evening without Felicyan having appeared.

Next day he asked for pen and ink, in order to write to his brother. Felicyan was well known and highly respected in his district; and though it was hardly likely that his influence would be sufficient to shorten Roman's term of

captivity, yet he might at least procure some alleviations to his lot.

The request for pen and ink was denied, nor did Felicyan make his appearance or give any signs of life either on that day or on any following day. Roman could not understand it at all. For a moment he was inclined to tax his brother with want of feeling, with selfishness; but short reflection caused him to dismiss the unworthy thought. Felicyan was not, had never been, capable of a selfish action. Perhaps he had come to Warsaw, but had been refused admittance to the prison; this was by far the most likely solution of the riddle.

The days wore away in weariness and discomfort, one like the other. Each weary day, followed by a still more wearisome night, made horrible by foul stench and the presence of vermin. Fleas were not the only nuisance from which he had to suffer. Large hairy spiders fell down upon him from the wooden rafters of the ceiling, and earwigs turned up unexpectedly from fissures in the damp wall. Rats, too, were not uncommon visitors, and regularly put in an appearance to feast on the *débris* of his meals.

By dint of persistency, Roman had at length obtained clean sheets for his bed; and a circular note, which he managed to get changed for nearly two thirds of its actual value, gave the means of somewhat improving his bill of fare. He was permitted twice daily to walk for half an hour, escorted by two sentries, in a small paved court, shut in on all sides by high walls with small grated windows; but his further request for books or papers, by way of beguiling the long, weary hours and distracting his mind from painful reflections, was not attended to.

He had several more interviews with the governor, all equally unsatisfactory for both parties, and leading to no apparent result. Each time Roman reiterated his protest against the unjustifiable detention of a German subject, and each time he was informed that the term of his release must depend upon the issue of negotiations between Berlin and St. Petersburg. He, the governor, could do nothing on his own responsibility, but must await orders from the capital.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

JOCOSE.

"Why dost thou laugh? it fits not with this hour."

—*Titus Andronicus.*

Six weeks thus passed away, and the end of August was at hand, when one morning he was again summoned by the governor.

On entering his presence Roman started back involuntarily, for the governor was not alone. His companion was General Vassiljef.

General Vassiljef looked ten years older than when Roman had last seen him. His eye was dull and lustreless, the jaw had a feeble droop, and the hands were agitated by a slight trembling motion that had not been there before; yet, broken down and feeble, his mere presence was sufficient to produce considerable dismay in the young officer's heart.

The general's recovery had been very slow, and even now his memory refused to give a clear account of what had occurred at Countess Massalowska's villa that unlucky morning. If put upon his oath he could not have told for certain whether he had indeed brought the portfolio with him when he came to restore the lapis necklace. He might just as well have left the portfolio at home in the first instance, or he might have left it in the carriage when he got out. The only distinct moment in his mind was the moment of clasping the necklace upon her throat before the looking-glass. The necklace had fallen to the ground—and then—then he had suddenly found himself in Gurko's ante-chamber without the portfolio. He had an indistinct recollection of having seen Biruta again, but this picture was even more vague than the previous one. She had been angry with him, he remembered; but about

what? Was it because he had kissed her shoulder? And where was now the portfolio?

The doctors who attended Vassiljef pronounced his state to be highly critical, and strictly prohibited all excitement or allusion to agitating topics for some time to come. Common consideration, therefore, for one of the most efficient and distinguished generals in the service, demanded that he should not—just at present—be pressed upon the subject. It was thought probable that he had, previous to his seizure, locked away the papers in some safe place, of which he had forgotten the clue. As soon as he should have recovered possession of his mental faculties, he would doubtless be himself the first to solve the riddle. The general, on his side, only too thankful to be left in peace, volunteered neither information nor conjecture, least of all would he have dared to name Countess Massalowska in the matter. But he knew that an explanation could not be much longer deferred. He must soon be called to account, and, having yesterday chanced to hear of Roman's arrest and detention in the state prison, he had not been able to divest himself of a certain undefined misgiving with regard to this young man, whom once or twice he had happened to meet in Biruta's *atelier*. It was in order to put his mind at rest on this point that he had himself conveyed to the Citadel early this morning, although his doctor had not yet authorized him to leave the house. Arrived there, he had first some conversation with the governor of the jail, at the end of which Roman had been summoned to appear before them.

"We have met before, I think, at Countess Massalowska's house," said the general, addressing the prisoner.

Roman bowed.

"You went there often, I believe, during my absence at St. Petersburg?"

"The countess did me the honor to use my head for a picture," he replied, with studied indifference.

"But she got tired of your head very soon, apparently," said the general, with a gross chuckle. "The divine Biruta is apt to change her models."

Roman bit his lip nearly to the blood. It was difficult to keep calm under the clumsy shafts of a man who had dared to insult Biruta by his degrading passion; yet he succeeded in answering quietly:

"As you are so well informed, general, no doubt you can also tell me who is my successor in the picture?"

"How am I to guess who is your successor?" said Vasiljef, testily. "It may be a Chinese model or a Congo negro, for anything I know. The countess left the country six weeks ago, and has not been heard of since."

This was all Roman required to know, and now he knew it. His heart leaped up joyfully. Biruta was safe; so all was well. He could not quite repress a long breath of relief.

But that breath had not passed unnoticed, and was sufficient to revive the general's undefined suspicions.

"This is news to you," he said, eying Roman with as sharp a glance as his bleary eyes were capable of. "You were not aware that Countess Massalowska had left the country?"

"Am I likely to hear much news in this confounded hole? I have not seen a newspaper for six weeks, and not a soul came to visit me since I was locked up, not even my brother."

The general was silent. Evidently there was nothing further to be got out of this young man. He turned to the governor of the prison, and conversed with him in an undertone. At the end of some minutes the governor beckoned Roman to approach, and in a short, aggressive manner informed him that he was free. The order from St. Petersburg had arrived this morning, that he was to be escorted to the frontier, and there put at liberty to go where he pleased; the only stipulation being that he was never again to replace foot on Russian soil.

Roman received the news in silence, and with conflicting feelings. His heart leaped up at the idea of freedom—of Biruta! But in the midst of his joy there came the thought of his brother, whom he was leaving forever. Was he not to be allowed to take leave of him? To say

farewell to Stara-Wola? After a minute's reflection he put this request into words.

The governor shook his head; the order from St. Petersburg did not enter into such sentimental details as farewells; the message was briefly to conduct him to the frontier, nothing more.

Here Vassiljef unexpectedly interposed, and, drawing the governor aside, began another whispered conversation. The governor nodded once or twice, and then they both laughed out loud, their fancy tickled, apparently, by something that had been said—at some humorous aspect of the situation. When the governor turned back towards Roman, his eyes were still twinkling with irrepressible merriment.

“What a charming thing is family affection,” he said, “and how lucky you are to have a friend at court! Now General Vassiljef, always remarkable for his tender heart” (here the governor poked the general in the ribs, and both went off again into a renewed fit of laughter)—“remarkable for his tender heart, as I was saying, and touched by your attachment to your brother, has begged me to make an exception in your favor. It is granted; you will be taken to Stara-Wola—under escort, of course—and allowed a quarter of an hour for your affectionate adieus. I hope you are duly grateful?”

Roman, fully more puzzled than grateful, merely bowed his acknowledgment of the favor. He was satisfied at having gained his point, to be sure; but where was the joke? He could see none, though the echoes of coarse laughter still rang in his ears, as he walked back to the cell to prepare for starting.

CHAPTER XXIX.

LIBERTY.

"To-morrow to fresh woods and pastures new."

—MILTON.

It was almost worth while to have spent six weeks inside a Russian prison, in company of rats and earwigs, to have been nourished on mouldy bread and greasy soup, and reduced to pacing a damp quadrangular court sixty feet square by way of exercise, in order to taste the intoxicating sensation of recovered freedom.

Roman's health had suffered from the long confinement, and he had been still further weakened and pulled down by an attack of intermittent fever; but now as he took place in the railway carriage that was to bear him westward, away from Russia, from danger, from tyranny, he forgot all these grievances, so sweet was it to feel that they now belonged to the past. He was not alone, of course, in the carriage; two Cossacks, armed from head to foot, had been appointed as escort; their orders being not to leave him out of sight until he should have reached the frontier.

Just now they were sitting opposite to him, two swarthy, expressionless individuals of the bull-dog type, with shapeless, frost-bitten noses, and an undefined odor of colza-oil hanging about their persons. Their sole idea of duty appeared to consist in not for a single moment removing their small bead-like eyes from off their charge's face, denying themselves even the luxury of winking, it seemed.

Yet on the whole their presence scarcely disturbed Roman more than a couple of wooden dummies would have done. He let his gaze rove over the landscape they were passing through, and gave himself up to pleasurable dreams.

The country is not a very beautiful one just here. Large stretches of forest cut down at either side of the railway in 1863, in order to remove this means of shelter from the Polish insurgents, imparts an air of desolation to the scene, scarcely enlivened at long intervals by groups of dusky swine grazing among the tree-stumps and herded by a shaggy peasant, who keeps his charges together by means of stones discharged from a sling. Sometimes a horse, its front legs hobbled together, attempts to flee from the approaching train, with painful stumbling motion, and occasionally there is a glimpse of a wretched hamlet, composed of crazy wooden huts blackened by age and weather, and roofed in by thatch of bleached and rotten reeds.

But to Roman, just released from captivity, everything appeared beautiful to-day. It was the same world, yet not quite the same, that he had left six weeks ago ; for nature, like time, never stands still, and summer had made a considerable stride since he last had looked upon the face of field and forest.

It was summer still, both according to the calendar and the atmosphere, for September was not yet reached, and the heat was as great as upon any day in July ; but it was summer that was distinctly changing to autumn. Not the less beautiful on that account, for the first foreboding symptoms of disease are often fairer to look at than the robustness of perfect health. The crude raw greens of early summer had been toned away to something far more fastidiously delicate in hue ; the forest crown was beginning to take a tint that might be likened to a hectic flush ; the beauty of departing life was beginning to mingle with the beauty of approaching death. The grain was gone from the fields, that six weeks ago had resembled a tawny sea of rippling water, and as the train now emerges from behind the trees the clean-cut stubble stretches away on all sides like a carpet of burnished gold.

What splendid weather this had been for the harvest, thought Roman, as he was being whirled along ; hardly a drop of rain for the past month. He was glad of it for his brother's sake. And then he began to reflect on the com-

ing interview with Felicyan, and to wonder what explanation he would give of his non-appearance in the Warsaw prison. He did not doubt his affection; but surely he might have contrived to obtain access to his brother by the display of a little energy? Energy! yes, that is where Felicyan fell short; probably he had suffered himself to be discouraged by the first refusal, and had not renewed his attempt. And that which they had to say to each other must now be compressed into the space of fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes was a very short time in which to say farewell for life, and he wondered whether he would be able to see his brother alone. Here he glanced at the two Cossacks opposite, whose eyes as usual he found upon him with fixed but expressionless stare; those men would cling to him like leeches he felt. What was to be done regarding those papers that were hidden away behind the picture of Paul and Virginia? He could not, of course, remove them to-day; but he must contrive to reveal their hiding-place to Felicyan, who would keep them in charge until some favorable opportunity occurred of conveying them to Germany. If no such opportunity occurred soon, why, then they must just be destroyed; their loss, though regrettable, would not be vital, since, in point of fact, those other papers that were already in safety contained ample information upon every point connected with his mission.

It was about noon when they reached the little country station that lay about eight *werst* distant from Stara-Wola. Here, after some delay, a conveyance was procured, and Roman, accompanied by his two satellites, got in. An hour's drive brought them to the village, and now the house itself is visible, showing white between the trees.

As the carriage turned into the short strip of avenue, Roman could see that a large crowd of peasants was assembled in front of the veranda; what could be the meaning of this? But in the next minute he had remembered that this must probably be the harvest feast; he recollected having heard that the oats were brought home some time in August, and this was August still. The

reapers were coming, as is customary, to offer the crown of oats to the master of the village. He could already hear their voices singing a gay song of rejoicing as they escort the buxom oat-crowned queen of the day.*

Not such a very gay song after all, it strikes Roman as he draws nearer the house. Why have they chosen such a dismal melody to-day? More suited to a funeral procession than to a gay harvest feast, it would seem.

And it *is* a funeral procession, he realizes with a shock, as, drawing up before the veranda, he has caught sight of a black-draped bier and a couple of acolytes distributing wax-candles to the crowd.

All sorts of horrible possibilities flash through Roman's brain. Hala? Luba? One of the children? Felician himself, perhaps?

He jumped down almost before the carriage had stopped.

"Who is it?" he cried, seizing hold of the nearest peasant, and shaking his arm by way of accelerating speech. "Whose funeral is this? Who is dead?"

"Stary Pan" (the old gentleman).

Roman let go the peasant's arm.

"Thank God!" he muttered. How stupid he had been not to have thought of this at once, as the most natural, the least painful answer to the question. The death of an imbecile old man could hardly be reckoned a misfortune, even in the most affectionately united family.

A relief was it not rather, to himself and to others, that this useless life had come to a close!

* A custom prevalent among most Slav nations; the wreath is carefully preserved for a twelvemonth, after which the grain from it is mixed up with the seed to be sown, in order to insure a plentiful harvest.

CHAPTER XXX.

HALA.

"This sorrow that I have, by right is yours."

—*Richard III.*

ROMAN entered the house, closely followed by the two attending Cossacks. In the corridor he met the priest coming out of the big saloon, where he had been pronouncing a last blessing over the corpse. The door of the saloon stood open, and Roman went in, expecting to find the family there assembled. There were a good many people in the room, and in the centre, just where on Easter Day the Swiencone feast had been laid out, stood the coffin, already closed, and only waiting to be carried out to the churchyard.

The windows were shut, and the atmosphere in here was heavy and oppressive. There was no sound of weeping and wailing in the room; but the whole air vibrated with a humming, buzzing noise, like the interior of a monstrous beehive. This buzzing was loudest round the black catafalque that stood in the centre, for here it was that myriads of flies, attracted by the fulsome presence of death on this sultry August day, hung clustering about the coffin, wrestling with each other in futile endeavor to penetrate the dense wooden screen, and pay their last, loathsome tribute to that which lay within.

Luba was the first person that Roman caught sight of, standing at the foot of the coffin, clad in deep mourning, and holding by the hand the two children, who likewise were dressed in black. She looked across at Roman with a strange, startled expression as he came in, but did not advance to greet him; rather she shrank a little away to one side. Felicyan was not in the room; but near to one

of the windows sat Hala, her head bowed down over her clasped hands, in an attitude expressive of deepest affliction. He could not see her face.

It was only fitting that he should say a few words of condolence to his sister-in-law on the subject of her father's death, and he had made a few steps towards her, when a touch on the arm arrested him.

Luba was standing beside him now, looking anxiously into his face.

"Do not speak to Hala; do not let her see you," she said, in a hurried undertone. "Go away—go away."

"But why—" he was beginning, when Hala raised her head, and he saw her face. What was it, this dreadful expression of stony despair, that he saw written there? The reflection of a grief too deep for words, of a sorrow too hard and too hopeless for the luxury of tears. Even making allowance for the natural, the proper grief, which every daughter must feel on losing a parent, was it rational, was it conceivable, that a sane, healthy woman like Hala should give herself up to such unmitigated anguish for the death of an old man, who had been but the shadow of a father at best—who for the last ten years had spent his days, from April to November, in killing flies, and from November to April back again in lamenting that there were no flies to kill? And what had Luba meant by her mysterious warning? It was too late to inquire now, for Hala had seen him, and he could not avoid addressing her.

He went up to Madame Starowolska.

"You have had a great misfortune, my sister. Believe me, I am sincerely sorry for your loss."

Hala stared at him fixedly, but did not answer. It was almost as though she did not recognize her brother-in-law.

"A great loss," repeated Roman, puzzled and embarrassed by her attitude; "but you must not let yourself be overcome to this extent. He was old, and it is only the law of nature to which we must all submit. You will get over this in time."

"Never!"

The word came out with the unexpected violence of a pistol report, and the fierce energy with which it was spoken alarmed him even more than her former passivity. What was the matter here? Had Hala gone mad?

"Where is Felicyan?" he asked aloud, looking round uncomfortably. He had not much time to lose. Three out of the fifteen minutes were already gone.

Hala had risen from her chair now, and was standing before Roman—or was it Hala at all, this queenly, majestic woman, who seemed all at once to have grown several inches taller, her features transfigured by the workings of some terrible emotion, which lent them an awful grandeur?

"Where is Felicyan?" she cried, her voice ringing out high and shrill through the long, low room—"where is Felicyan? Where—but in Siberia!"

"Siberia! Impossible!" but even as he said the words a sickening dread had crept into Roman's soul. He turned round his head towards the pictures on the wall. There were only three remaining there; the place where they had hung the fourth was empty, marked only by a few dangling, ragged cobwebs. "What has he done? Who sent him there?" he concluded, in faltering accents.

"Who sent him there? You dare ask that question! Shall I tell you who sent him to Siberia? You have sent him there! You—you—*you*!"

The last word was almost a shriek—the shriek of Medea and Cassandras, glorious to hear on the stage, terrible in real life—as she came up quite close to her brother-in-law.

"Not I—not I, Hala! Do not say that!" cried Roman, wildly.

"I will say it, for it is the truth; who else but you has sent him there? The house was searched, and some papers were found behind a picture. Who put them there? And what were they all about? I do not know, any more than did my poor Felicyan. But it was high-treason, it seems; and as they were found in his house, he must pay the penalty with transportation for life to Siberia. That is your work. Are you satisfied?"

"Have pity, Hala ! have pity !"

Luba now flung her arms round her sister's neck, and tried to calm her.

"Hala, dearest Hala, do not say such cruel things; try to forgive ; oh, try to forgive him !"

The elder sister tore herself free from the girl's embrace. Violently she wrenched the soft, clinging arms away from her neck.

"It is easy for you to speak, Luba. You are not unhappy ; you have lost nothing." (Here Luba drew back, as if she had received a sudden stab. She did not again attempt to interfere.) "But I—I have lost my husband ; my children have lost their father. Can I forgive, can I have pity, when he has had none on me?"

"But could I have guessed, could I have foreseen when I came here?—"

"Why did you ever come here at all, to disturb our life with your hateful secrets, with your incomprehensible ambitions—and—and your elegant patent-leather boots?" completed Hala, not at all conscious of any weakness in the climax. "We had no secrets before you came ; we were happy ; and I never thought that fustian was ugly till I saw your fine Berlin coats. And, oh ! I told him so. I said that his coat was ugly, and that I was ashamed of his appearance. And now—I shall never see him again ! Oh ! what have you done with my life?" she finished, with a low wail, stretching out her hands towards Roman, as if calling upon him to restore the lost happiness of which he had robbed her.

He attempted no answer this time. What could he have said that would not have sounded weak and foolish in presence of this tremendous sorrow ? He stood, very pale, his eyes bent on the ground, not daring to raise them again to the face of that woman whom he had injured beyond redemption ; his ears filled with the ceaseless buzzing that came from that black catafalque alongside, and which, to his distraught fancy, sounded like a murmur of countless upbraiding voices, repeating over and over again that *he*, *he*, and *he* only, had ruined his brother.

But this was only fancy, of course. The flies had no thought of Roman, who was but an insignificant living man in their eyes. They cared but for that dull piece of clay that the coffin contained. For its sake only they had abandoned garden and meadow to-day—a corpse in August was to them sweeter far than any rose or carnation.

Give back her lost happiness? Was that what she was asking of him? Would that he could do so at the price of every drop of his blood! Would that he could recall these last six months, and live them over again! But that might not be. The march of time is inexorable, and the ball of fate, once set rolling, may never be stopped. As soon bid last year's dead leaves resume their place on the branch; as soon tell that mighty river to roll back again to its source, as seek to cancel a single hour—a minute of the past!

One of the guarding Cossacks now drew near, to say that the fifteen minutes had expired.

"Farewell, Hala!" said Roman, hoarsely. "Will you not say that you forgive me?"

But Hala had sunk down again on her chair, and was sobbing piteously. He could see the large salt tears trickling through her closed fingers. All the commanding majesty had gone from her attitude now, and she was once more a commonplace woman—but a woman with a broken heart.

He must go—his presence here was worse than useless; but Luba followed him to the door, and put her hand softly into his. She could not let him depart without a word of comfort.

"I forgive you," she said, very low; "from my heart I forgive you—all the harm you have done. May God bless and make you happy!"

Her black eyes, raised to his, were full of unshed tears—tears of compassion—and—of something else. Looking into their depth, he read her secret there, but its recognition was but additional pain. Oh, God! was this new self-reproach to be added to the first? Was not his chalice of remorse already full to overflowing? He turned away with a groan.

Meanwhile the coffin had been carried from the room, and placed on the bier outside. As Roman was starting to go back to the station, the funeral procession was just beginning to move off slowly in the opposite direction. First walked the priest; with him two acolytes, carrying the crucifix and the holy water; and behind the bier came the peasants, holding their wax-candles all awry, and filling the air with lugubrious music. Though the day is radiantly beautiful, and overhead the August sky stretches away in a dome of unbroken blue, yet a single black cloud is to be seen hovering just over the coffin, keeping pace with the slow march of the funeral procession.

The flies of Stara-Wola are escorting to the grave the remains of their mortal enemy.

CHAPTER XXXI.

PREY.

"The wild beast passion for adventure wild
We all have in us, hide it how we will;
And when I see a white dove plump and mild
I understand the vulture."

—OWEN MEREDITH.

THROUGH a horse suspicion had been directed to Roman Starowolski; a far more insignificant animal was the cause of Felicyan's transportation to Siberia.

The house at Stara-Wola was searched within some hours of Roman's arrest. Shortly after dinner there had arrived a police commissary with a warrant, accompanied, too, by mounted Cossacks, and, moreover, by two minor officials, who forthwith proceeded to turn the building topsy-turvy from cellar to loft. Every single key in the house had to be produced, every press, box, cupboard, and drawer was submitted to a minute examination, which spared neither Luba's pearl-inlaid work-box nor little Kostus's Noah's ark. Then the stables and barn were visited, and received their due share of attention.

Felicyan awaited the result with a tranquil conscience, not being aware of having anything to conceal. On his brother's account he was uneasy and disturbed, not knowing what was happening to him, but for himself he had no anxiety. Nor had the house-search been unexpected. From the moment of Roman's arrest he had been preparing for it, and his first care this morning, on hearing what had occurred in his absence, had been to examine the room lately occupied by Roman, in case anything suspicious should have remained behind. Here he found nothing save the empty case of chamois leather into which he had seen his brother stow away some papers on the previous evening.

Why had he taken them out again? And where had he put them? These were questions which must remain unanswered for the present. Felicyan had no very clear idea of the nature of these papers, for Roman had never volunteered to show him the plans and notes he had collected; but he knew enough to guess that they must be of a compromising nature. Perhaps, after all, Roman had been able to destroy them at the last moment before his arrest, which would account for their disappearance. Better so, Felicyan thought.

After spending some hot and dusty hours visiting the farm-buildings, the police officials returned to the house with heated countenances, grimy hands, and ruffled tempers. It was irritating to have spent so much time and energy to so little purpose.

Felicyan, rejoicing in the prospect of a speedy deliverance from their society, invited the police commissary to partake of a glass of *wodki** before leaving. No Russian official in his senses ever refuses a glass of *wodki*, so of course it was accepted, and together with their host the three officials sat down in the big saloon to partake of the refreshments.

There was not much attempt at conversation, for it is difficult to talk pleasantly and naturally to men who have just been searching your house and suspecting yourself of felonious designs; but the commissary growled out some surly remark about the crops, and his satellites condescended to smack their lips over the *wodki*, by way of approval.

Then, just as Felicyan was replenishing their glasses for the second time, the door opened, and old Nicorowicz wandered in, looking more than ever like some strange, unreal figure out of a nightmare. He had aged considerably during this past summer, the features had become more shrunken, the skin more waxlike in its yellow transparency, his gait was feebler, and his movements more uncertain. His aim in fly-killing was not as unerring as it used to be,

* Spirits.

yet he clung to his old pursuit with the same tenacity as of yore, and even now his daily victims might be reckoned by hundreds.

It was now the height of the fly-season at Stara-Wola, walls and ceiling were thickly dotted with flies; they lurked in every fold of the curtain draperies, and danced against each window-pane. The air vibrated with their buzzing voices, and the floor was strewn with the corpses of the slain, which crunched beneath the old man's slippered feet as he glided over the boards.

He came in, wringing his transparent fingers together, and softly moaning to himself.

"My whip! I have lost my whip! Who has stolen it away from me?"

"Hush, grandfather," said Felicyan, soothingly, "we shall look for it by-and-by."

The three officials, who had paused for a moment to stare at the grotesque apparition, now resumed their glasses.

"By-and-by the flies will be gone away," and he broke into a helpless whimper.

At this moment the children came running in by another door in breathless excitement.

"Here is the whip, Dziaduniu,"* cried Zosia.

"We found it in the garden," from Kostus.

"Burek had stolen it," said the girl.

"And now we are going to beat him!" cried both in one breath, with evident relish, as they dashed away to put the sentence into execution.

Old Nicorowicz had snatched hold of his beloved weapon with trembling eagerness. He now examined it all over with tender scrutiny, as a sportsman may view a pet rifle, to convince himself that it has sustained no injury. Having satisfied himself on this point, for, beyond some tiny indications of a dog's sharp teeth on the handle, and a little general slobberiness, no harm had been done, he proceeded to wipe it carefully on the sleeve of the Turkish

* Grandfather.

dressing-gown. The old man, now quite happy again, smiled serenely on the company; with his weapon in hand he felt himself a match for all the flies in Christendom.

The three officials had watched this little scene with some amusement as they sipped their *wodka*, under whose influence they were gradually thawing to a more genial frame of mind.

"Bravo!" said the commissary, as Nicorowicz knocked over two flies that had settled on the table.

One of the minor officials put down his glass, and loudly applauded with both hands.

Flattered at the evident admiration his prowess was exciting, the old man redoubled his efforts, and soon a score more of insects had gone to join the corpses on the floor.

Presently a large blue-bottle came buzzing through the open window, with as much noisy arrogance and conscious assumption of superiority as though it had been a queen-bee, or at the very least a hornet. Not that a blue-bottle fly is by any means an insignificant being. It holds undoubtedly a high social position in the insect world, and is consequently valued by the fly-hunter, much as a ten-antler stag is prized above the smaller game.

This particular blue-bottle, however, did not seem inclined to afford any chance of sport, but banged about angrily against the ceiling, as though to express astonished dissatisfaction at the quality of the plaster, which it had expressly come hither to investigate.

Old Nicorowicz, his head tilted back on the shrunken neck, was wistfully following its movements. He knew that the insect must tire itself out in time, and alight somewhere to recover breath, the only question was whether it would settle anywhere within reach? Already its turns are beginning to slacken in pace; there, now, it has paused at the top of the curtain-rod—too high, alas! for his feeble arm to reach. But no, it is off again, flying lower this time. It stops; it settles on the edge of a picture-frame. Now is his chance, now or never.

Softly and noiselessly, as a cat stalking its prey, old Nicorowicz stole across the polished oak boards, every

line of the wasted figure expressing wily caution, the thin lips parted in a smile of cunning imbecility, the sunken eyes alight with anticipated triumph. The hand which held the leather thong was slightly shaking with the excitement of the moment.

The sporting instinct is deeply rooted in the heart of man, and few can look with positive indifference on the capture of any animal, from a whale to a minnow, from a wild boar to a bee. Even a Russian detective, engaged in tracking the noblest of all game, may condescend to feel passing interest in the capture of a fly.

The three officials had turned to look how the chase would end. Would that feeble old man with the shaking hand be able to bag this victim? He was so frail, so transparently fragile to look at, that one could not help fancying that half a dozen very determined blue-bottle flies would have been sufficient to knock him down. And yet, by one of those subtle refinements of cruelty, of which only fate is capable, this feeble, fleshless old arm was destined to strike a blow that shattered the happiness of a whole family.

He had come to the picture, which hung a little out of reach, and had to raise himself on tiptoe, in order to bring his hand on a level with the top of the frame where the blue-bottle had elected to settle.

The faintly-tinted faces of Paul and Virginia were looking straight into his eyes with their fixed, unmeaning stare, the large round-bellied fly was motionless, its brilliant body showing like a spot of dark-blue enamel against the tarnished gold.

Nicorowicz paused for a moment in order to steady his arm, then the blow descended.

There was a crash of broken glass as the picture fell to the ground; the rotten frame had given way in falling, and some papers were strewn about the floor. The Russian commissary picked up one of those that had fluttered to his feet. It was a military chart, with shorthand notes and indications of some of the projected bridges across the Vistula. . . .

The blue-bottle fly, meanwhile, had flown off unscathed through the open window.

There is no need to dwell upon the details of Felicyan's arrest and condemnation: the damaging evidence of the military chart was amply borne out by other papers and photographs that had been concealed behind the picture; and a renewed search of house and grounds led to the discovery of the apparatus containing the negatives from which the views had been printed off, and that by some rare chance had escaped the first investigation.

It was in vain that Felicyan affirmed his innocence, and absolute ignorance alike, of the existence of any such papers in his house, as of any knowledge of the photographic art. No one believed him; and even were he not actually himself the author of these compromising documents and pictures, he must have been accomplice to the crime, and, being a Russian subject, had become guilty of high-treason.

Felicyan's defence, lame and awkward, only served further to incriminate him in the opinion of his judges. He feared to betray his brother, therefore rather kept silence from a mistaken sense of honor. It is, however, questionable whether, even had he spoken out, his words would have availed anything in his favor. International etiquette—which even Russia is bound to respect—does not admit of hanging each other's subjects, or shutting them up for life. The system of military inter-espionage has of late years become so general as almost to be accepted by a tacit understanding between the powers, and no one dares to deal over-harshly with his neighbor's spy, in case his own spy should be made to suffer in return. It is consequently fully more embarrassing than satisfactory to capture a foreign emissary, since the only thing you are allowed to do with him is to show him the inside of a prison, and then conduct him with speedy politeness across his own frontier. There is no particular fun in catching a mouse, if you are obliged to render account of it to some other cat.

However convinced, therefore, the Russian authorities might be that Captain Starowolski was a German spy, sent hither by government, they were not at liberty to act upon their convictions, more especially as no incriminating proof was able to be brought home to him. He must be put at liberty, since a longer detention might lead to awkward complications with Germany.

But with regard to Felicyan, the matter stood on a very different footing. Felicyan was a Russian subject; he was their own private mouse, which they were free to tear limb from limb, or flay alive, as a playful fancy suggested, without any one having a right to interfere. He had been guilty of high-treason; the papers and the photographic apparatus found in his house were sufficient to establish the case against him. Had he written these notes? Had he drawn those plans? Had he taken those views? It mattered little. Some one had drawn them, and therefore some one must be made to suffer for it. The Russian subject should pay the penalty of the German officer's work. It was necessary to make an example of this case, so as, at least indirectly, to damp the ardor of other spies, and deter them from poking their noses into the country.

Felicyan, conveyed to Warsaw, had been lodged in the same prison where Roman was confined, each brother being miles from suspecting the near vicinity of the other. It would not at all have suited the Russian authorities to enlighten Roman on this point, or to confront the brothers. Such a meeting might lead to unsatisfactory results; for if Felicyan were proved to be innocent, no convenient victim would then remain on whom to wreak their vengeance.

It was Felicyan who left the prison first. Scarcely four weeks after his arrest the sentence was pronounced—*transportation for life to Siberia, with ten years' hard labor in the mines*. The appeal for a fresh investigation and renewal of the trial was not attended to, and even the request to be allowed a parting interview with his wife and children summarily refused.

Old Nicorowicz had fallen ill soon after these events; but in the state of painful confusion into which the household at Stara-Wola had been thrown by the arrest of the two brothers no special importance was attached to his condition. The doctor called in had recognized nothing further than a sort of feverish debility, apparently aggravated by a painful swelling on the left arm, which might have been occasioned by the sting of some insect—a fly, perhaps. At this time of the year the sting of a common house-fly was sometimes known to be exceedingly poisonous.

After a while the swelling had subsided, and the old man recovered so far as to be able to leave his bed. He was but the ghost of his former self, however, and the flies of Stara-Wola had little cause to fear him henceforth, though from force of habit he still clung to the leather thong.

Thus was he found sitting one day near the window, with fixed and glassy eyes, in his bloodless hand the weapon that had slain so many legions.

CHAPTER XXXII.

REMORSE AND REASON.

"I have shot mine arrow over the house
And hurt my brother."

—*Hamlet.*

"But there is little reason in your grief."

—*King John.*

It was late at night when Roman reached Thorn, having half an hour previously got rid of his two Cossack attendants at the frontier.

On repairing to the hotel of the Blue Dragon, where it had been arranged that he was to join Biruta, he learned that the countess had quitted the town nearly a month previously. She had, however, left an address to say where she was to be found at Berlin. And so, as it was at any rate too late to proceed farther that night, Roman contented himself with telegraphing his release and safe arrival on German territory.

He had, strange to say, felt almost relieved on finding that their meeting was to be deferred for another twenty-four hours. The emotions of that day had been too sharp and painful to admit of any further feeling finding place alongside, and he was unwell, too. His head was burning like fire, the limbs, heavy as lead, all but refused to carry him. Purely physical fatigue, and the craving for rest and quiet, had for the moment overpowered every other sensation. He was incapable of connected thought, and perhaps it was better so; thought could be but agony, and reflection protracted torture just then.

He was still in this semi-stupefied condition when he reached Berlin next day, and almost mechanically found his way to Biruta's rooms.

She was lying on a sofa when he entered the sitting-

room, her regal head, crowned with its diadem of pale tresses, thrown back upon her clasped hands, the silken folds of her corn-colored garment flowing softly about her. Stretched on the carpet at her feet lay Gogo, larger and fiercer-looking than two months ago. Biruta had not yet seen Roman, and he paused for a moment at the threshold, while all at once there rushed over him the conviction that he loved this woman to distraction. It was the first distinct sensation of which he had been conscious since yesterday.

In the next instant her quick ear had caught the sound of his footstep, and she had sprung up with a cry :

"Victoria! My Roman, we have conquered; together we shall carry the world before us!"

"Yes; we have conquered," said Roman, as he took her in his arms with all the hungry passion of a lover long deprived of his rights, but there was no ring of triumph in his voice as he said it. Rather he looked like a man defeated. She was not slow to perceive this.

"Are you ill, Roman? What is the matter? Why do you look at me so strangely?"

He certainly looked ill. Six weeks in prison had bleached away the sunburn, leaving his face pale and wan.

"Perhaps I am ill," he replied, passing his hand across his forehead with a weary gesture; "I do not know."

"It is only fatigue," Biruta decided, in her short, imperious fashion. "All you require is rest and sleep."

He repeated the last word with a bitter emphasis, "Sleep! If only I could go to sleep and never wake again!"

She was now seriously alarmed by his manner. Something must be wrong beyond mere fatigue.

"Tell me," she commanded, drawing him down to a seat beside her, her large gray eyes piercing him through and through, as though to read his inmost thoughts.

Then, as coherently as he could, he told the tale of yesterday's visit to Stara-Wola and the circumstances of his brother's arrest, which he had gathered from the servants in coming out; relating how, by a cruel turn of fate, it had come to pass that the simple-minded agriculturist

had been forced to pay the penalty of his brother's ambition.

Biruta listened with a slight frown on her broad forehead.

"Go on," she said, when he had ceased speaking.

"There is no more to tell. Is not that enough? More than enough?"

"Yes; of course. It is very sad, very unfortunate for your brother and his family."

"Sad is not the word. What I feel is that I can never be happy again in this life."

Biruta drew his head down on to her shoulder.

"Yes; I understand," she said, soothingly. "It is only natural that you should feel upset, just at first."

For a minute he let his head rest on her shoulder, like a tired child; then he looked up quickly.

"Do you mean to say, Biruta, that you imagine that I shall ever be able to get over, to forget this? I should be a brute if I did so."

"Well, perhaps not exactly forget, but the pain will pass in time—every pain does. It would not be natural or possible to go on grieving forever for another's misfortune."

He shook his head with more decision than was usual with him.

"I shall never forget—I shall never be able to forgive myself for having ruined my brother's life."

"You must be ill, Roman, to talk in this exaggerated manner. You cannot be held responsible for what has happened. No sane person would think of blaming you."

"I told you what Hala said—that I had destroyed her happiness; and it is true—you know it is."

"I know nothing of the sort," she replied, with a slight tinge of impatience, "nor can I conceive why you should attach any importance to your sister-in-law's words. She was excited, unhappy, of course, so you could hardly expect her to be logical. You should not let yourself be so easily impressed by mere words spoken at random."

"It is not her words merely, for my conscience tells me the same. Yes; I have done it—I alone. If I had never

gone to Poland, Felicyan would not be on the way to Siberia now."

"If, if, if! What is the use of breaking your head over what might have been if something else had never occurred? If it comes to that, however, the question has two sides. If you had not gone to Poland, we should never have met, never have loved each other. Do you really mean to say that you regret having gone to Poland this year?"

Her eyes were looking into his with a sudden softness, the more fascinating because of its contrast to her usual expression. There is but one way of answering such a question, when put in such a manner; and Roman, under the circumstances, did not behave with greater originality than any other man in his place would have done. But still his heart refused to be light.

"If only our happiness had not been bought at the price of another's misery," he said, moodily.

"But need we make ourselves miserable because some other people are not as happy as we are?" she returned, with ingenious sophistry; "that would be foolish, illogical, worse than useless. If every one in the world were happy, then it would not be the world at all, but heaven. Happiness and misery are everywhere to be found side by side in life, and are often the direct consequence of each other. Fate has decreed that you are the lucky one this time, but it might just as well have been the other way. You might at this very moment have been in Siberia, and your brother still living peaceably at Stara-Wola."

"Yes, I might be in Siberia," said Roman, dreamily; "but the cases are scarcely parallel, for it would not have been Felicyan's fault if I had gone there, whereas his fate has assuredly been brought about by me. He would never have done what I have done."

"You mean that he would not, in your place, have undertaken this mission?"

"He would certainly have declined it, because—"

"Because he had not the talent for such an errand."

"No; because he disapproved of it all along—because it would have been against his principles, his honor. Fe-

licyan is not clever, perhaps, but his instinct here was truer than mine has been."

"No use in arguing that point now, or in crying over spilled milk. Listen to me, Roman," she went on, taking hold of both his hands, and speaking like some one who is trying to reason a foolish child out of some preposterous notion: "you are still under the impression of all you have lately gone through. That scene at Stara-Wola yesterday has quite unnerved you. It is a thousand pities you ever went there at all. But for this we have to thank our *cher ami* Vassiljef, who devised the clumsy vengeance of this *coup de théâtre*. You are not in a state either to be able to see clearly or think calmly to-night. But I can do both for you. You must believe me when I say that it is mere morbid folly to reproach yourself as you are doing; once having accepted this mission, you were bound to carry it through at any cost."

"Ay, that is just it. Why did I ever accept the mission?" he muttered between his teeth.

"You might just as well ask yourself why you ever entered the German service?" she retorted, coldly.

"And have I not been asking myself that question over and over again during the last twenty-four hours?" he broke out, passionately.

Biruta frowned again. This despondent mood was more deep-seated than she had imagined. His doubts, his self-reproach, must be smoothed away, or there was no saying where they might lead him. He must not be allowed to think.

"I cannot listen to such folly, or answer questions which no sane man would think of asking. Let us try to keep to facts, if you please, and not bewilder ourselves with conjectures which can have no result, or we shall next be asking ourselves why we were ever born at all? Here are the facts. You, as German officer, accepted a mission from your government, which—with my humble assistance—you have brilliantly accomplished. An unfortunate accident, which no one could have foreseen or prevented, has led to your brother's arrest. For this no one

is to blame but chance and fate. You might just as wisely blame the fly which caused the picture to fall, as yourself. It was not in your power to save him. You could only have done so by compromising your government. Your duty was therefore clear. Private considerations must always give way to great public interests."

"But is it not cruel, is it not terribly sad, that just Felician of all people should be the sufferer? He who never had a wish nor an ambition beyond his family and his farm! He never did me anything but good, and now this is to be his reward!"

"It is very sad," she conceded readily, perceiving with satisfaction that her words were already making an impression, and that he seemed to be resigning himself to the inevitable; "but life is full of such sad accidents. Is it not sad, for instance, that so many innocent men should be killed in each war? Yet the sacrifice of their lives is a political necessity. So, in your brother's case, he is but a political victim. One among many."

Was Luba to be viewed as a political victim too? mused Roman; and was the unhappiness he had yesterday read in her eyes also a necessary condition of his obligations towards Germany? Aloud he said:

"But it is not one victim only. The wife is broken-hearted, the children have lost their father, and—and—the sister, too, is unhappy—because—"

"Because she loves you," completed Biruta.

Roman started.

"You knew it? How did you guess? Why did you not warn me?"

"I only found it out that day I went to Stara-Wola. Remember, I had never seen the girl before. I taxed her with it, and she did not deny; but it quite escaped my memory afterwards—it was a mere detail, and we had far more important things to discuss when you came to Wodniki. We need not discuss it now. Why dwell on any of these painful circumstances? When we cannot remedy a thing, the only way is to put it out of sight."

"I could never do that."

"I shall teach you, Roman," she said, putting up a white hand to his forehead, and stroking back the hair with a firm caress; "I shall force you to be happy in spite of yourself. It is the only sensible thing to be done now. No regrets can do any good. Even were you to blow out your brains this very moment, it would not alter the situation."

"No," he returned, gloomily. "You are right. It would not alter the situation."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE DEAD-HOUSE.

"Man makes a death which nature never made."

—YOUNG.

FELICYAN'S name was not again mentioned between them. Roman had recognized that Biruta was right in saying that no good could come of any such further discussion, and she was too wise to risk disturbing his mind by any chance allusion. She counted much upon the natural and legitimate gratification which the praise of his superiors must cause, for counteracting other painful impressions, and in this she was not mistaken. Roman was overwhelmed with honors, and lauded up to the skies for the truly intelligent and masterly fashion in which he had accomplished his mission—the revelations afforded by the contents of General Vassiljef's portfolio far surpassing anything that could have been expected or hoped for. His name was entered for special promotion, and a brilliant future prophesied for him on all sides.

Of course his mission and Biruta's share in the matter were not generally proclaimed; but something of the story oozed out, nevertheless, and when it became known that the Handsome Pole, as he was nicknamed at Berlin, had spent six weeks in a Russian prison, and was, moreover, going to wed a beautiful and wealthy Polish countess, Roman became a regular hero of romance to the fashionable world. He was surrounded, admired, and envied—envied in particular for having made the conquest of such a woman as Countess Massalowska.

And she was, indeed, a woman whom any man might have been proud of winning for his own. Roman himself, though by nature endowed with a fair average amount of

masculine vanity, could never wholly subdue a faint sensation of surprise that so brilliant, so fascinating, so remarkable a woman as Biruta should have given herself to him. Every day he discovered something new to admire in her; with what consummate skill and energy had she not conducted the whole affair? His whole success, the laurels he was now reaping, were they not her work? Had it not been for her he might still have been in prison at this very moment, for his deliverance, too, had been her doing. It was for that reason she had left Thorn to go to Berlin. Undaunted and unabashed, she had left no stone unturned till she had gained her object.

The marriage had been fixed for the first week of November, and Roman pushed on the preparations for the event with feverish energy, anxious, it seemed, to put this decisive barrier between himself and the past. As the time drew nearer, however, he grew more restless, and was subject to frequent fits of moodiness. Biruta, whose penetrating eye nothing escaped, felt anxious, and, without appearing to do so, watched him closely—redoubling her efforts to keep him interested and amused during the brief span that still separated them from the event. It had been settled that they were to spend their honeymoon in Italy, an extensive leave of absence having been readily granted. Roman's health, which had so evidently suffered from the long confinement in prison, made a change of scene and climate desirable.

Biruta hardly let him out of her sight during these last weeks that preceded their marriage, and was his constant companion whenever he could be spared from his military duties. In the mornings they used to ride together in the now almost deserted Thiergarten, and in the evenings would take drives in the environs of Berlin, or visit the lions of the place.

One afternoon—it was already late in October now—they paid a visit to a neighboring picture-gallery, Biruta having heard that some rather good pictures were here exposed to view. Roman was in a state of almost reckless high spirits that day, and far more than usually talka-

tive, responding readily to Biruta's often very original remarks upon the pictures they saw.

"Soon we shall be walking together through the Vatican and Pitti galleries," she said to Roman, as she took his arm to saunter round the first large room, hung with paintings of all sizes and all degrees of merit. Among the first they stopped to examine together was an exquisitely finished group of mythological subjects, one of which represented the judgment of Paris, executed in a style infinitely superior to Biruta's own bold but erratic attempts in art. She looked at it with a little envious admiration.

"What delicacy! what finish! I am afraid I shall never be able to attain such a point of perfection. But never mind," she added abruptly, with a sudden quick pressure of Roman's arm, which sent an electric thrill coursing through his veins, "my Paris is better than his. Just look at his shepherd; it cannot hold a candle to mine."

"I wonder if General Vassiljef knows that you are here," said Roman, remembering the general's remarks about Biruta's models that morning in the prison.

"We shall send him an invitation to the wedding," said Biruta, lightly. "I would give anything to see his face when he opens the envelope."

"Let him live," said Roman, magnanimously. "He can do us no more harm now. It would probably give him another stroke of apoplexy to see our names together."

Countess Massalowska laughed, her peculiar, low, musical laugh, that resembled the gurgle of an icy-cold woodland spring.

"You are right; it might kill him, poor man. We shall send the invitation to your friend Rabowski instead. It is only fair to ask him to the *déjeûner*, after the false hopes you raised in his mind regarding Wodniki and the French cook."

They both laughed again at recollection of the description Biruta had given of Rabowski's appearance at

the castle with the message from Roman the morning of his arrest. His warning had just enabled Countess Mas-salowska to catch the next train, and she had left the sorely duped *gourmet* standing on the doorstep in considerable bewilderment, but under the evident impression that Biruta was merely going on a short drive, and would presently return, to preside over an Epicurean dinner prepared by a French man-cook.

"Perhaps he is still standing there, turned into a pillar of salt," Biruta was beginning, when suddenly she broke off, having caught sight of some old acquaintances sitting on a sofa at the other end of the room. "I shall be back presently," she said to her lover, as she left his side to go and speak to them.

Roman, abandoned to his own devices, continued rather languidly to inspect the paintings, without feeling very much interest in the subject. Bereft of his fair cicerone, the pictures had lost their power to charm. Then, having exhausted the contents of the first room, he strolled through the open doorway into the adjoining apartment.

This was a much smaller room than the first one, put aside for the reception of water-color sketches. It was empty just now, except for a couple of artists at the farther end, bending over a sketch which hung rather low. Roman, having nothing better to do, lounged up to see what they were looking at, for their figures concealed the picture from view. They stepped aside just as he reached them, moving off in another direction.

This portion of the wall had, in the present exhibition, been devoted to the works of a young Russian artist of much promise, scholar of Vereschagin, and who bade fair to rival his master in the realistic force and morbid pathos which have made his fame. There were about a dozen pictures here exposed to view, mostly scenes taken from Russian literature, from the works of Turguenief, Dostojewsky, and Tolstoi.

The largest of these, which formed the centre-piece of

the group, represented an episode in Dostojewsky's most celebrated work, "The Dead-House."*

A Siberian convict has just breathed his last in the sickward of the prison. The body, hideously worn and emaciated, is absolutely bare, save for a little cross-shaped amulet which hangs on the sunken chest. The smith has been called in to knock off the iron fetters that hold the feet together, since they are now no longer required. The blacksmith's face expresses neither pity nor disgust. It is evidently a job to which he has been blunted by long practice, and he performs it as stolidly as though he were unshoeing a horse or an ox. Half a dozen other figures are grouped about the bed. The officer who has been summoned to verify the event has uncovered his head, in mute, involuntary homage to the majesty of death. The other men are convicts, who look at their comrade with a mixture of curiosity and awe. The foremost one is turned towards the officer, to whom with a gesture he indicates the naked, shackled corpse on the bed.

"And yet, he—he too had a mother!" such are the strange, irrelevant words which Dostojewsky, with the instinct of genius, has put into the mouth of this figure; words which serve, better than any others, to strike the key-note of the scene—a note of bitter pathos, of irretrievable sadness.

Biruta stood chatting for some ten minutes with her friends, then she went in search of Roman. She found him standing before a picture in the chamber of water-colors, so absorbed apparently in its contemplation that she had to speak to him twice before he heard, then with a start he seemed to wake up from a trance, and as he looked round she saw that he had turned white to the lips. From his face she looked to the picture, and understood. No need for questions here; the picture spoke plainer than words could have done.

* In this work Dostojewsky, under an assumed personality, relates his own experiences in a Siberian prison.

"You are ill, Roman; let me take you home."

"Yes; I feel a little upset—it is only the heat," he responded, with a ghastly smile.

She did not remind him that it was raining, and that only just before he had been remarking that the weather was unusually cold for October.

They drove home in silence, avoiding each other's eyes.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A DREAM.

"A thousand fantasies
Begin to throng into my memory
Of calling shapes and beckoning shadows dire."

—MILTON.

ROMAN had a dream that night, one of those intensely vivid dreams which only come to us in fever. He was in a boat, the blue water dancing all round him in the reflected glory of the summer sky. Bright dragon-flies are hovering on the surface, and swift-winged swallows passing to and fro, then a branch of hawthorn, and now he is falling—falling—falling—into the water. Who will save him? Felicyan! Felicyan!

Then the scene changes; he is lying on the bank, safe, quite safe, and his brother is kneeling beside him, weeping tears of joy at his rescue, and calling him his little Roman. But how is this? It is Felicyan himself who is lying on the grass now, stiff and rigid, and beside him there kneels a blacksmith with a file. He has come to remove the irons; dead men do not require fetters. But no, he is not dead; he moves, the iron links rattle against each other. He rises to his feet, and now it is he who calls out, "Roman, save me! Roman, save me!" and the chains go on rattling—rattling.

Roman sat up in bed, bathed in cold perspiration. He is awake now, but how is it that he still seems to hear the rattling sound of iron chains in the room? Ah! it is only the wind shaking the casement. He had forgotten to close the shutter, which swings backwards and forwards on its rusty hinge. It is still night, and he must go to sleep again. Sleep! sleep is only for the innocent, the guiltless. Could Cain go to sleep after having killed his brother? And is

he not his brother's murderer just as much as if he had stabbed him with a dagger? Felicyan is not asleep now, for in Siberia it is day, not night. He is working in the mines, perhaps, and his chains rattle as he moves—those chains that have now become an actual part of his personality, as inseparable from him as his bones or flesh, never to be taken off, no more to be laid aside henceforth till the releaser, Death, shall come. Felicyan is yet in the prime of manhood, and in ten—twenty—thirty years, perhaps, he will still be toiling in Siberia, still wearing those chains!

Is it not all a hideous nightmare? Can it, indeed, be possible that any man born of woman should be doomed to a fate so cruel, so inhuman? "And yet he, too, had a mother!" A mother who had brought him into the world with pain and suffering, who had been proud of her first-born, had smiled at his first smile and wept at his first tear.

The mother is dead long since—she has been spared the anguish of knowing the fate of her child; but the wife—that other woman who is bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh—she is alive. She is young and strong—strong enough to feel with keen intensity every agonizing detail in the tragedy of her life; young enough to drag on for years the weight of this unnatural widowhood.

The wind was rising higher; the shutter creaking to and fro on its hinge made a grating sound intolerable to bear. In his overwrought nervous state, it gave Roman a feeling almost of physical pain, akin to the touch of a rough hand on a raw flesh-wound.

He got up and fastened the bolt securely. No more rattling now, but would he be able to sleep? Could he ever sleep again? Oh, for a sleeping-draught that would give him oblivion, forgetfulness for a few hours at least! Yet what would that avail him? The waking must come again, and with the first dawn of consciousness he must resume the burden of remorse of which he would never more be free. Had he not his chains to wear as well as Felicyan? And were they not infinitely more unbearable than those, because they were of his own forging? Every one envied

the handsome, successful Captain Starowolski, yet he wondered whether, in the whole length and breadth of the German empire, there existed a more wretched man than himself.

He poured out a glass of water from a caraffe, and drank it eagerly. Would this pain in the head ever cease?

His eye now fell upon a brown-leather case that lay on the table near the water-caraffe. His revolver. Yes, here was the sleeping-draught close to his hand! He took out the weapon, and ran his fingers along its cold, bright muzzle of polished steel. How simple, how easy, what a natural solution of all doubts and difficulties. It required but a slight movement, a mere mechanical action of the fingers, and then all would be over—forgetfulness—oblivion—peace.

Ay, but what then? What object would be gained by the sacrifice of his life? Biruta had been right in saying that the situation would be unaltered, even were he to blow out his brains. Felicyan would still be in Siberia, Hala still broken-hearted. To kill himself would be the act of a selfish coward, affording relief to himself only.

With a sigh he laid down the weapon.

Was there, indeed, no way out of this labyrinth of misery? Must he suffer remorse to the end of his days? And yet what other course was left to him? Could he have acted otherwise than he had done? No, certainly. His conscience, his common-sense, told him that, as a German officer, he could not betray his government. So long as he wore that uniform he was bound to make subservient to duty all private considerations. *So long as he wore that uniform.* He repeated the words several times over, mechanically at first, then with dawning comprehension, as though discovering therein a new meaning—a hidden sense not previously apparent.

CHAPTER XXXV.

GOGO.

"A beast that wants discourse of reason."

—*Hamlet.*

ONE morning, about a fortnight after that visit to the picture-gallery, Roman came out of the German war-office, in hand a large, official-looking document. He was reading it over as he walked down the pavement, then, having folded and securely placed it in the breast-pocket of his uniform-coat, he hailed a passing *droske*.

The lines about his mouth were drawn and hard-set, and he looked like a man who has just passed through a mortal illness, but his voice was quite steady as he gave the order to drive to the hotel where Countess Massalowska lodged.

The hotel porter was not in his *loge* as Roman entered, and he passed in unnoticed, and up the principal staircase. Here a confused hubbub of voices reached his ear, and he paused on the first landing, on seeing a group of rather scared-looking individuals, all talking, in evident excitement, and pointing to something on the top of a high oak press that stood in the corridor. A waiter, napkin in hand, was engaged in stanching the blood that flowed from a wound in the right arm. A timorous traveller peeped cautiously out from his rooms in order to see what it was all about, then hastily closed and bolted the door. There was a general sound of hurrying footsteps and a distant shrieking chorus of hysterical female voices. All ladies lodging in the same hotel, and not the ladies only, were terrified on learning that the savage-looking bear-cub belonging to the handsome Polish countess had broken its chain, and was loose about the premises. It had severely

bitten two men who had tried to capture it, and had now taken refuge on the top of a high wardrobe, whence it defied its besiegers. A ladder had been fetched and placed against the wall alongside, but no one felt much inclined to ascend it. The formidable row of teeth which Gogo was freely disclosing did not make the prospect an inviting one.

It was at this juncture of affairs, and just as Roman had reached the landing, that a door at the farther end of the passage was flung open, and the countess herself, in a loose morning robe of dark-blue velvet, came out to investigate the cause of the tumult. It needed but a glance to take in the situation.

"Why do you not catch him?" she asked, imperiously, of the assembled waiters.

No one answered, but the wounded man held out his bleeding arm.

Countess Massalowska looked at it with indifference.

"Gogo only bites people who are afraid of him," she said, coldly. "Will no one fetch him down from there? Ten marks to the man who goes up the ladder."

Thus encouraged, the Boots began to ascend, but the savage growl with which Gogo prepared to greet him ere he had mounted half the rungs caused him to beat a hasty retreat.

"Cowards!" exclaimed Biruta, in her clear, ringing voice, that always reminded Roman of a silver clarion; "shame on you all to be afraid of a mere cub! He is as harmless and as playful as a kitten to any one who understands him."

Some audible grumbling from the German menials. They were not accustomed to be called cowards, nor were they used to play with such formidable kittens as this one.

Countess Massalowska, seeing that there was nothing to be done here, now addressed herself directly to the rebellious bear.

"Gogo!" she said, imperiously, "come down this instant!"

The cub only growled and showed its teeth anew.

"Gogo!" she repeated, in a louder key this time, keeping her large gray eyes immovably fixed on the animal.

Gogo stopped growling, and began to look sheepishly uncomfortable. He tried to avoid her eye, but could not manage to look away, compelled apparently by some magnetic force that he was powerless to resist.

When she had called him for the third time, the bear drooped his head, utterly vanquished, and began slowly to descend, holding on with teeth and claws to the uneven surface of the wood, letting himself glide down one of the twisted columns that flanked the press on either side. In the next minute he had touched the floor, and crawled to her feet with an abject expression of fawning submission.

Countess Massalowska administered a careless box on the furry ears of her favorite by way of castigation; then, laying hold of the dangling end of broken chain, she disappeared down the corridor, dragging the sulky cub, while the heavy blue velvet folds swept the ground behind her.

Biruta had not once glanced towards the staircase, whence Roman, screened by the group in front, had been spectator of the scene.

Had she chanced to look around, the conclusion of this tale might even then have been a different one.

The waiters gaped and stared a little, then crestfallenly they wandered off to their respective employments. The wounded man betook himself to the nearest water-tap, to bathe his lacerated arm.

Roman remained standing alone at the head of the stairs in deep thought. He had made a movement as though to follow Biruta, then checked himself.

"Better not," he muttered, bitterly; "if I see her again, my resolve will melt away like moonshine. I should be forced to obey her as that cub did just now."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

REFLECTIONS.

“ Thus with the year
Seasons return ; but not to me return
Day, or the sweet approach of eve or morn,
* * * * *
But cloud instead ; and ever-during dark
Surrounds me.”

—MILTON.

THE year was drawing to a close, and nature had sunk into winter torpor. But the brightness gone from the earth has taken refuge elsewhere, and the genial warmth of the domestic hearth replaces the vanished sunshine. A pleasurable bustle animates each household at this season, for it wants but few days of Christmas. High and low prepare to celebrate the anniversary of the Saviour's birth. Not a Polish hovel but will have its traditional national dish of blessed *cutia** on Christmas eve ; not a housewife but is gravely absorbed in devising the *menu* of the Vigilia supper.

At Stara-Wola only there are no such signs of joyful activity this year. Christmas here will come and go unnoticed and unfelt, or, if remembered at all, its celebration will be but additional pain, from the contrast evoked with former happy years.

A death-like stillness has settled over the place; even the outward appearance of the house seems changed, weighed down, as it were, by a sense of brooding misfortune. No laughing children's faces appear at the window; the house-door never opens to admit a visitor now; deep snow lies undisturbed up to the very threshold, for, of the

* Polish Christmas dish composed of corn, honey, and poppy-seeds.

many gay sledges with tinkling bells that scour the country at this season, not one will venture into the gates of Stara-Wola. Rabowski himself knows that he has nothing here to expect, and heaves a regretful sigh for the good things of the past, as he drives past the low white house that, standing by the frozen river, resembles a gigantic coffin, watched over by the gaunt, frowning spectres of bare oak-trees.

And inside the house there is scarcely more life than without. The servants go about their work in apathetic silence. The last fly has long since been gathered to its forefathers; the very dogs seem to have forgotten how to bark; the children shrink away from their mother, who never speaks to them now or smiles—whose eyes have grown so large, so sad, so strange-looking.

The whole care of the household had now devolved upon Luba, and perhaps it was as well that a merciful Providence enabled her to drown her own sorrow in active employment. Seeing her sister a prey to grief that was threatening to unhinge her mind, Luba was forced to take upon herself the duties the other was incapable of fulfilling. She had long since relinquished all attempt at active consolation, recognizing its futility. Resignation, softness, submission to the inevitable, and a healthy reawakened interest in her children, all that now remained to her—these might perhaps come in the future, in some months, years perhaps, or perhaps never, the young girl sometimes feared with a sinking heart, as she watched her sister's fixed and stony face, and the unquiet way in which she wandered from room to room, as though seeking for rest everywhere, and finding it nowhere. Often, too, at night Hala would rise abruptly, and, exchanging her bed for the big saloon, pace up and down the floor till day-break, with the feverish mechanical motion of a caged wild animal.

She is walking there just now, in the gathering twilight of the December afternoon. The sun has but lately gone down behind the pine-wood belt across the river, but within the room there is still sufficient light to distinguish

the pictures on the wall, and the reflection of Hala's figure as she paces to and fro, casting her image into each of the two dingy mirrors alternately.

She is in deep mourning, as befits a widow; her dress is black, black as was her hair a little while ago. The hair is no longer black, but gray, almost white—in startling contrast to the dark eyes and straight jetty brows. Soon it will have lost all trace of its original color, and never, never again will any one remark on the likeness between the sisters.

In the feeling of secure possession of calm, conjugal happiness, Hala had never even contemplated the possibility of losing her husband. She had thought, as many another happy woman has done before her, that death was not for such perfectly healthy, perfectly happy people as herself and Felicyan. It was to her mind hardly even a remote contingency; at any rate, something which she need not begin to think of for many, many years to come.

Had, therefore, Felicyan been taken from her by one of those unforeseen accidents that wreck some lives—had he been swept away by illness, struck dead by lightning even—the blow would have been terrible, crushing, yet as nothing compared to this. Any death, even the most unlooked-for, would have been merciful, peaceful, happy almost, in comparison to this unnatural way of losing him. She could have accepted her widowhood from the hand of God, she thought, had such been decreed, but she could not accept it at the hand of an unjust tyrannical fellow-creature. Death is less cruel than man. It does not rob us so utterly of our beloved ones. It leaves us their graves to be wept over, their last words to be treasured up in tender memory.

Their last words! What a sharp thrill of agony there was in the thought! The remembrance of her last conversation with Felicyan tortured the unhappy wife like the consciousness of a crime. She had spoken bitter, unkind words—under a misapprehension, it is true, but not the less unbearable to think of now.

Domestic tiffs will occur between the most united

couples—it cannot be otherwise. The intimate nature of the bond renders friction unavoidable, and only such persons never disagree as are never wholly united. Conjugal quarrels mostly pass by without leaving a trace behind—they are written in sand, in water; and, where true affection exists, a smile, a caress, are sufficient to destroy even their memory.

But the memory of this quarrel, of this misunderstanding, may never be driven away. In her bitter self-reproach it seems to Hala as if each of those hasty words was now engraved in marble, as though every passing frown had been cast in bronze.

These thoughts, Hala is thinking them for the hundred-thousandth time, as she walks to and fro in the large, empty room. She will go on thinking them as long as life and reason last; and it is the maddening pressure of that revolving train of thought that has bleached her hair, and is threatening to craze her brain.

The first mirror gives back her reflection, a short, stout woman, clad in mourning, with white hair and black, despairing eyes; then the picture goes out of the glass, and the second mirror, catching it up, reproduces it in different fashion. A tall thin woman it is this time, but her hair, too, is white and her black eyes full of despair.

No news of Felicyan has come to Stara-Wola since his transportation nearly four months ago. The journey to Siberia, performed partly on foot, lasts several months, and perhaps he has not even yet reached his destination. Will he be able to write at all from the mines? Hala does not know; and she hardly knows either whether to hope or fear for a letter. For what news can a letter bring? What can it tell her except that he is living? And living, in his case, is but another word for toiling—suffering.

She walks to the window and looks out mechanically. It is rapidly getting dark. A flight of crows traverses the frosty gray of the sky; the frozen river glitters coldly in the twilight; the outlines of the fir-trees yonder are beginning to grow shadowy and indistinct. Very shadowy and indistinct, likewise, is the form of a sledge coming along

the road; it is not even possible to distinguish whether it is a peasant sledge or a better style of conveyance.

Hala turns away from the window, and resumes her weary walk up and down the room, accompanied always by a ghostly figure alongside—a short ghost and a tall one, who relieve each other in monotonous alternation.

The house door opens and closes with a loud bang, but the tall ghost never checks its reckless walk: there are hurried footsteps in the corridor outside, and the dogs begin to bark excitedly, yet the short ghost does not pause to listen.

But now the tall ghost is again alongside of Hala, and both she and it have stopped abruptly, a new expression dawning in their eyes—an expression that is no longer despair, yet not quite hope. Yearningly, tremulously, incredulously two pairs of arms are stretched out towards a figure in the doorway.

A man, clad in the coarse gray-cloth dress of a Siberian convict, stands there. His head is shaved in a semicircle from ear to ear,* his face is aged and worn, and around him the great rough dogs are leaping joyfully, licking his hands and fondling his knees, his ankles, and behind him come Luba and the children—the servants—and all are talking together. . . .

Can miracles happen? Can the grave give back its dead? Oh God, be merciful! Can a weak human heart bear the pain of so much happiness?

"My husband! My husband!" and with a great cry Hala is by his side, in his arms, at his feet, and it seems well-nigh impossible that she should survive the agony, the ecstasy of this moment. . . .

But she does not die of happiness, and an hour later she is kneeling by Felicyan's side as he sits in the familiar snabby arm-chair, deserted since summer; she is still gazing at him with all the concentrated intensity of despair that had lately changed to joy. But few words have

* Siberian convicts are shaved in this fashion in order to facilitate detection in case of escape.

passed between them as yet: speech will come by-and-by, when the first emotion has subsided.

"My husband! My husband!" these are all the words she can speak just at first, and she needs no others. The lingering tenderness with which they are spoken says more than volumes of speech could do. She cannot say them often enough. "My husband! My husband!" It is sufficient happiness to be able to say these words, to touch him, to feel him near; to pass her fingers across his poor shaved head; to caress his large, rough hand, the fingers all red and frost-bitten; the wrist still bruised and galled, from the recent friction of iron rivets.

But presently Hala, still kneeling, raises her face to his.

"God is good after all, Felciu. I had almost begun to doubt it, but he is good. He would not let you suffer for your brother's fault."

Felician's face contracts with a sharp spasm of pain.

"Hush, hush!" he says, putting his hand over her mouth to check the words, "you do not understand—Roman is a hero, a saint, and we owe him our happiness. He has taken my place—he has gone to Siberia!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RESIGNATION.

"He gave his honor to the world again."

—*Henry VIII.*

UNKNOWN to Biruta, Roman had applied for his demission from the German army. His request had at first been received with astonished incredulity. It was inconceivable that so brilliant, so successful an officer should think of giving up his career just yet. He was given to understand that any reasonable concession would be made in order to retain him. If his health had suffered, an extensive leave of absence would be granted. If his present post were not to his liking, there might be found other more congenial employments. The position of military attaché at Paris would soon be vacant, and perhaps it was not impossible, etc., etc. . . .

But persuasion and hints were alike thrown away on Major Starowolski (he had received his promotion within the last few weeks). He gave no reasons, he asked for neither favors nor distinctions, but he adhered to his resolution of laying down the sword at once, and irrevocably.

He was impatient to be rid of this odious livery; to regain possession of his own conscience; to be free once more to act as an honest man, unhampered by political considerations; to divorce from each other two irreconcilable characters.

The growing conviction that his moral position was an untenable one, because he could not serve two masters at once, had culminated that day in the picture-gallery, and the following night had brought him the long-sought answer to the riddle.

Henceforth his resolve was fixed. If the dress he wore,

the oath he had sworn, did not permit him to follow the dictates of his conscience, why, then, that dress must be discarded, he must be released from that oath, no matter at what cost—at the price of his happiness, or even of hers.

He had intended to go to Biruta, and, in hand the paper containing his demission, to say farewell; he had meant to tell her that he preferred death to dishonor, and that even in her arms he should never have been able to stifle the gnawing pangs of remorse. He would have begged her to forgive the pain he was causing, and asked her to forget the unhappy man who had not been strong enough, or base enough, to bear the consequences of his actions.

All this he had meant to say, and had entered the hotel with the intention of saying it, but the words had remained unspoken. There had intervened the incident with Gogo, of which Roman, standing behind the group of terrified waiters, had been spectator; and in the blind, unresisting submission of the sullen bear-cub he had seen, as in a mirror, what would be the issue of the interview he was seeking. When the woman is so terribly strong, and the man so fatally weak, the result is a foregone conclusion.

This seemingly trifling incident had fixed his destiny, by making him realize, as he had never realized before, the full power of this woman whom he was fated to adore as a lover and obey as a slave.

How beautiful, how majestic she had looked at that moment, as, standing at the head of the staircase, she had imperiously summoned to her feet the rebellious bear. A queen! a goddess! A woman fit to govern the world!

Yet even as he gazed in spellbound admiration, before Roman's eyes there rose up another vision obscuring the first—the vision of a small pale woman with black, despairing eyes. She too had looked majestic. She too had been sublime, as with burning, impassioned words she had called upon him to restore the happiness of which he had robbed her!

His reason told him that he must not, dare not, see Biruta

again. If he saw her once more, if he felt her arm round his neck, her lips upon his, he must succumb to her will. His honor, his conscience, would be powerless to act. Had she not said that she would make him happy in spite of himself? She would—she could do so—he felt convinced of it, and it was of this happiness that he felt afraid. His only course was to flee from a bliss he dared not enjoy. He must not see her again.

His conduct was weak, unmanly, stern judges of character may say, perhaps; but what, after all, is weakness? and what is strength? And may not the truest strength sometimes lie in the very recognition of our own weakness?

That same day Roman left Berlin, and forty-eight hours later Countess Massalowska received from him a letter bearing a Russian postmark.

He had gone straight to St. Petersburg, where he gave himself up to the authorities. Being now no longer a German officer, he became a Russian subject, and as such pleaded guilty to the crime of high-treason.

His brother was innocent. He, and he alone, for his own private motives, had drawn the plans, had taken the photographs that had caused Felicyan to be condemned and transported.

He had no difficulty in proving his case. It requires but small rhetoric to convince a wolf of the expediency of devouring a lamb that offers itself as a holocaust; the fac-similes of some of the photographs that had been found at Stara-Wola, and the identification of Roman's handwriting, were sufficient to establish Felicyan's innocence and his own guilt. Besides, by this time the fact of his engagement to Countess Massalowska had penetrated to Russia, on hearing which General Vassiljef—who meanwhile had been dismissed in deep disgrace—had not hesitated to come forward and attempt to clear his character by affirming his conviction that Biruta had robbed the portfolio.

All these circumstances, taken collectively, rendered doubt impossible. Roman was condemned to lifelong

deportation to the mines, and simultaneously was signed the warrant for his brother's release.

Early in November the *ci-devant* Major Starowski quitted Europe as member of a convict convoy bound for Siberia, but his journey ended differently from what had been anticipated.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SNOWFLAKES.

"Long is the way and hard
That out of hell leads up to light."

—MILTON.

THE closing scene of this narrative is played out at day-break on a desolate Siberian steppe.

The days are at their shortest, and, in order to utilize the brief span of light, the convicts prepare to resume the march with the first faint streak that shows itself in the east.

They had halted last night on the outskirts of a wretched hamlet, where a deserted barn offered adequate accommodation for the prisoners. Like a flock of sheep, they had been driven into the building, where, huddled together on the cold earth-floor, they were left to pass the night as best they could—the Cossack guards meanwhile keeping watch outside, each one armed with a bayonet and a brandy-flask.

Escape is impossible, for the convicts are linked together in batches of five or six—each left hand riveted to a chain, which leaves just sufficient space between two men to enable them all to march in single file. Thus the movement of each man affects his neighbor, and at night the restless slumber of one imparts itself perforce to the other.

When the time for starting has come, the sentries enter the barn, and rouse the prisoners by a few vigorous curses, emphasized and diversified by some equally vigorous kicks.

Roman, who happens to be the last on a chain of five convicts, staggers to his feet, awakened by the tug of his companions, and looks around him in dazed fashion.

Has he just been dreaming? Of Biruta, perhaps? Of the joys of love? The thrills of gratified ambition? Of

all he had possessed a little while ago, and by his own act had renounced? Does he repent his sacrifice as he awakens to the consciousness of his actual position?

Before his eyes there stretches, melting away into the distance, a vast field of snow, seemingly endless—its immensity, its monotony, enhanced by the frosty mist which envelopes everything with a semi-transparent veil. Not a tree as landmark anywhere on which to fasten the eye; not a beast or bird to enliven the vast solitude; the rising sun, just beginning to show its crimson disk on the horizon, struggles to break through the brooding fog. It succeeds in casting a streak of ruddy light across the plain, which looks like a bloody path prepared to conduct the convicts to their living tomb.

The air catches his breath as he steps outside the barn. Cold is not the word to express the biting intensity of the atmosphere. It attacks the windpipe like a rush of boiling steam; it pierces the ear, the nostrils, with the force of a corrosive acid. It has begun to snow as the convicts are being formed into order for the march. But the snow here, too, is not as other snow. In our countries the flakes descend softly, noiselessly; they feel, at most, like chilly kisses, like cold caresses to the touch. The Siberian flakes are hard, aggressive; they deal out blows, not kisses, each one armed with an invisible sting that pricks like a pointed stiletto. Nor are they silent, for, as they strike against each other, the atmosphere reverberates as with the jingle of crystal chimes.

The prisoners, with their disengaged right hands, are rubbing their ears, their noses, to keep them from congealing; the Cossack guards are laying in a store of heat and strength from out their brandy-flasks. A red-nosed, one-eyed soldier, of peculiarly villainous appearance, has tilted up his bottle, and, with head thrown back, is pouring the last drops of some very fiery alcohol down his well-seasoned throat.

As he follows his companions, Roman, still half asleep, and blinded by the snowflakes, stumbles and falls, causing the four men in front of him to totter likewise.

"Get up, you Polish dog!" cries the one-eyed Cossack, hitting him on the head with the now empty flask.

There is a limit to every human endurance. Was it that this last insult had called to life abruptly all the latent pride of which a man's heart is capable? Was it that the absolute resignation of an heroic resolve is not eternal, and must sooner or later have given way? Hitherto no murmur, no word of complaint, had escaped his lips. Patiently, silently, apathetically, Roman had endured pain, hunger, cold, and fatigue, but he cannot submit to be called a dog by a drunken Russian trooper. All his blood rises up in hot rebellion; for the moment he forgets that he is a convict prisoner bound for the mines—he remembers only that he is a nobleman, an officer.

It needs but a moment to spring to his feet, wrest the bayonet from the hand of the insolent Russian, and with it fell him senseless to the ground—but that moment has sealed his fate.

Close by there stands a second Cossack sentry with loaded musket. His orders are peremptory in case of the slightest insubordination on the part of the convicts.

He raises his gun—there is a flash—a sharp report—a groan—and Roman Starowski, the handsome, distinguished officer, the affianced husband of Countess Biruta Massalowska, falls dead—shot through the heart. . . .

As the convicts move on they leave behind a deep crimson patch in the snow, too vivid to be the mere reflection of yonder blood-red sun, just detaching itself from the horizon.

But the large white flakes continue to fall, filling the air with their silvery music, and nothing soon will distinguish this spot from any other on the face of the lonely steppe.

POSTSCRIPT.

THREE women mourn for Roman Starowski, each in her own very different fashion.

His name is often on the first woman's lips, as with tender gratitude she teaches her children to revere the memory of one who gave back her happiness at price of his blood ; a happiness so great as to be almost undeserved, she thinks with reverential awe ; a deeper, more sacred happiness than the careless, unthinking joyfulness of a year ago, and as widely different as her snow-white hair from the jetty locks which will never be hers again ; happiness mixed with pain, that draws her yet closer to the husband for whom such a heavy ransom has been paid.

The second woman says nothing, but she will never forget her youth's early dream ; and though she may yet live to find peace and contentment in after-years by the side of some other man, her heart is irrevocably buried in a nameless Siberian grave.

The third woman's grief was violent and excessive, enhanced, too, by a sense of failure, intolerable to her proud spirit. To learn that her lover had broken his fetters at the eleventh hour caused her fully as much displeasure as sorrow. Even then she did not, just at first, confess herself defeated. She would win him back yet, she told herself, even from out of the ogre's very dungeon ; she would obtain his release from Siberia—that would be an object worth living for indeed !

And who knows whether she might not have compassed her end ? A character as dauntless as hers may overthrow every obstacle, save one. She might have triumphed over the czar, but she could not triumph over death.

When she learned that Roman was dead, and that she was thus deprived of her anticipated victory, Biruta began

to paint her own portrait in the character of Juno. A thousand pities, every one agreed, that this picture, which displayed such remarkable talent, was never completed ; for, scarce half finished, Countess Massalowska abruptly abandoned it, laying down the brush and palette in order to enter a Carmelite convent, where she intends to pass the rest of her life.

Will she indeed remain there forever, shut off by iron bars from a world she was born to govern and adorn ?

Time only can prove the stability of this resolve, for we chronicle these events in 1888 ; and, as General Vassiljef used to say, "the divine Biruta is apt to change her models."

THE END.

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